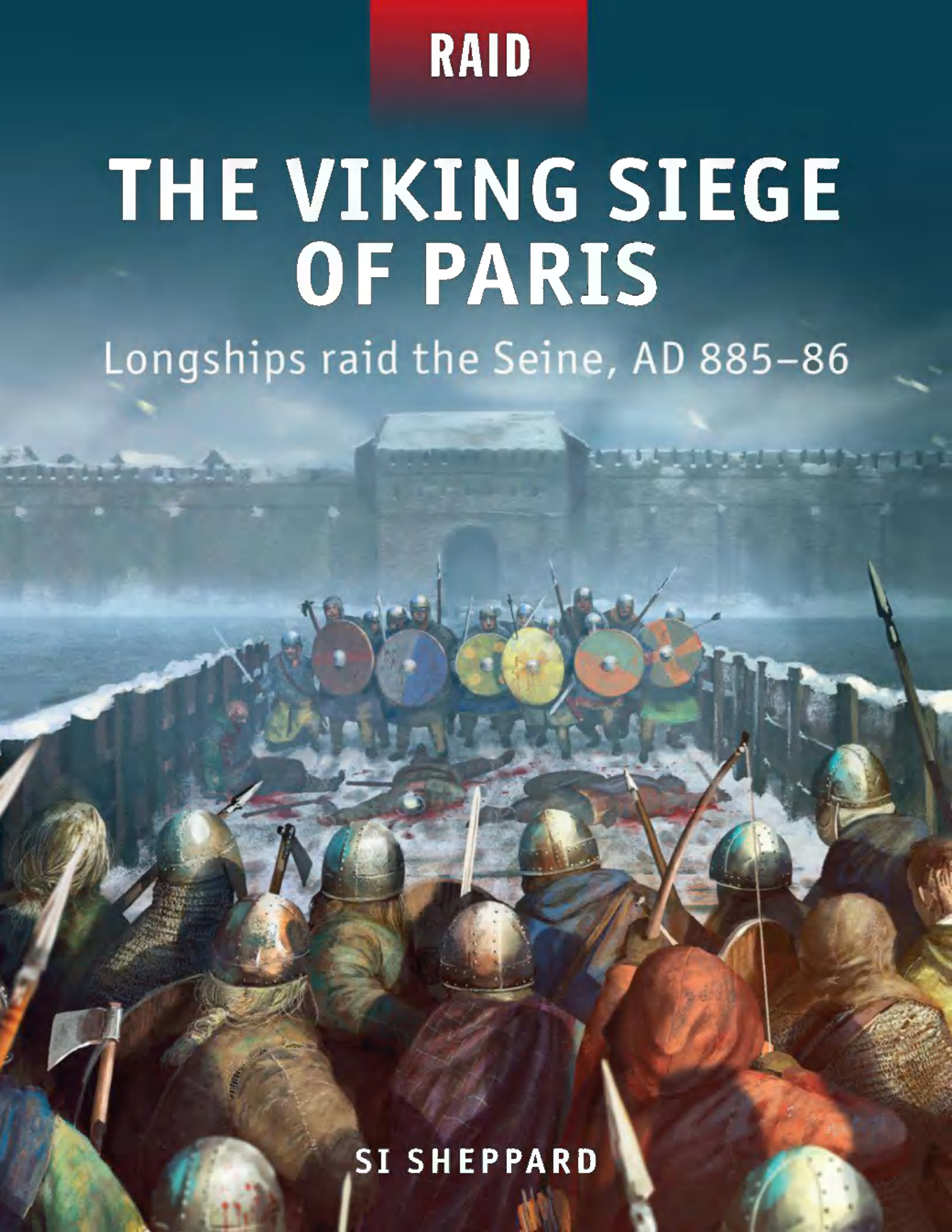
RAID

# THE VIKING SIEGE OF PARIS

## Longships raid the Seine, AD 885–86



SI SHEPPARD

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**Dedication**
Dedicated to my teachers.

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# INTRODUCTION

In the last decade of the 8th century, a new dread descended upon the already unsettled kingdoms of Christian Europe. Backed up as they were against the endless grey expanse of the Atlantic Ocean to the west, by the slave-raiding corsairs of the Islamic south and the hard-riding steppe nomads who dominated the east, the surviving fragments of the lost splendour of imperial Rome now had to face a challenge from an unprecedented direction – the hitherto utterly unknown realms in the north.

This catastrophe was heralded by the sack of the English monastery at Lindisfarne in 793. The *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* apprehended significance of this event in its account of the grim portents that foreshadowed the raid itself:

> In this year dire forewarnings came over the land of the Northumbrians, and miserably terrified the people; these were excessive whirlwinds and lightnings, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine soon followed these tokens; and a little after that, in the same year, on the VI of the Ides of January [6 January], the havoc of heathen men miserably destroyed God's church at Lindisfarne, through rapine and slaughter.

The sack of Lindisfarne sent shockwaves throughout the British Isles, whose inhabitants had grown accustomed to the relative security from continental avarice granted by the North Sea. 'Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made', the English scholar Alcuin lamented to Aethelred, King of Northumbria. The 'terror' spread rapidly. In Ireland, the Annals of Ulster for 793 grimly recorded 'Devastation of all the islands of Britain by the heathens.' While there is no evidence to substantiate any utterance of the entreaty now synonymous with the Viking era – *A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine* – 'From the fury of the Northmen deliver us, O Lord' – this apocryphal tradition reflects the despair of those Anglo-Saxon and Celtic communities who lived under the shadow of Norse incursions.

**Last stand on the Petit Pont (cover and introduction)**

The Île de la Cité, the heart of Paris in the 9th century, was connected to the left and right banks of the Seine by two bridges. The shorter of these, the Petit Pont, which linked the island to the Left (south, west) Bank, was constructed of wood. Its bridgehead was fortified by the Petit Châtelet, a wooden tower. During the night of 6 February 886, the rain-swollen Seine overflowed its banks. The bridge supports of the wooden Petit Pont failed and it collapsed into the river, being swept away in the current, leaving the Petit Châtelet tower isolated on the Left Bank. The following morning, the Vikings launched an attack, pushing a wagon loaded with hay against the tower and setting it ablaze. The last survivors of the garrison, just a dozen men, were forced to abandon the tower and fall back to the remnants of the destroyed bridge. With fire before them and water behind, the Franks had no option but to accept the Viking offer of surrender. One of the dozen, Eriveus, apparently a personage of some distinction, was held for ransom; the others were slain. Eriveus then demanded to share the fate of his erstwhile comrades. The Vikings obliged him the following day. They then tore down the remnants of the burned tower and flung the bodies of the slaughtered defenders into the Seine. For the mournful Parisians, it was the darkest hour of the siege.

Nor was the mainland to be spared. A 9th-century antiphony for the dedication of churches reflected the reality of life in a society under siege:

> *Summa pia gratia nostra conservando corpora et cutodita, de gente fera Normannica nos libera, quae nostra vastat, Deus, regna.*
>
> Our supreme and holy Grace, protecting us and ours, deliver us, God, from the savage race of Northmen which lays waste our realms.

These ‘Northmen’ are known to history as the Vikings, an anachronistic term derived from the Old English *wicing* and the Old Norse *vikingr*, which appears in the high-medieval Icelandic sagas as a synonym for pirate or raider. The Vikings were the cutting edge of a society previously utterly peripheral to the great civilizations of antiquity, but now, driven by climate change and a burgeoning population too restive to remain within the straitened confines of its indigenous fiords, determined to make its presence felt through exploration, trade, colonization and war.

The difference of more than a thousand years notwithstanding, this contemporary panorama of the approach from the north on the Seine to the Île de la Cité is strikingly similar to the perspective that would have confronted the Norse armada mooring under the walls of Paris in late November 885. Note how the bridges of the Grand Pont (left) and Petit Pont (right) radiating out from the bulk of the island midstream form a continuous barrier to Norse progress upriver. (Guilhem Vellut/**CC-BY-2.0**)

These chess pieces depicting Norse warriors also symbolize the wider Norse achievement of inter-cultural exchange across unprecedented distances. While the game itself originated in India, the pieces are shaped out of ivory – from walrus tusk traded by the Norse settlers of Greenland, at the other extreme of the Viking world. Note the central figure biting the rim of his shield, a reference to the popular mythology of the Viking berserker. (Getty)

Their achievements became legendary in their own time. To the west, Norse wayfarers probed ever deeper into the unforgiving Atlantic, colonizing the island chains from the Hebrides to the Orkneys, from Iceland to the frozen expanse of Greenland and on to the shores of the Americas. At the same time, Norse empire-builders pushed ever further east, navigating the great rivers of Russia to lord over the Slavs, and in their audacity attempting to storm the ramparts of mighty Constantinople; baffled by 'Greek Fire', many elected to remain and enlist in the elite Varangian Guard of the Byzantine emperors. But it was the realms of Latin Europe – the British Isles and the Carolingian Empire – that remained the primary focus for Norse greed, bloodlust and ambition. These were near enough at hand to be attainable in a single campaign season; weak and divided enough to be tempting targets; and wealthy enough to justify the risk of raiding. Here, a Norseman could fulfil the Viking ideal and carve a name for himself in the sagas, as expressed by 10th-century Icelandic warrior poet Egill Skall-Grimsson: 'I have gone with bloody blade where the ravens followed, and with screaming spear; Vikings fought fiercely. Raging we gave battle, fire ran through men's houses, I let bloody bodies sleep in town gateways.'

# ORIGINS

## Faith

A common faith was the sole shared framework of reference in Western Europe, where the Catholic Church had enormous secular power. In many ways, when imperial authority splintered after the death of Charlemagne, it was the clergy who sustained the institutions of government in addition to holding the social fabric together. When King Charles the Fat departed for Rome in 875 to seek the imperial coronation from Pope John VIII, he left West Francia exposed not only to Viking incursions but to full-scale invasion by Louis II, King of East Francia. ‘It is for us meanwhile, the bishops of France, to inspire and encourage the ministers of our State in this evil hour’, Hincmar, Archbishop of Rheims, intoned in a missive to his fellow prelates. ‘We stand between the hammer and the anvil, between these two brother kings, held fast in their strife.’

Though later Norse warlords wanted land to settle, the primary motivation for the raids of the 9th century was Carolingian treasure, as embodied in this horde. It was greed, not anti-clerical fervour, that motivated the specific targeting of abbeys and monasteries, for church plate could be very valuable. A gold chalice and paten which the monastery of Redon gave to ransom Count Pascweten of Vannes was said to be worth 67 solidi, a princely sum at a time when a sword cost 5 solidi and a war-horse 20. (Artokoloro/Alamy Stock Photo)

The Church hierarchy was rich as well as influential. In addition to its deriving substantial revenue from management of extensive estates, the Carolingian monarchs granted tax exemptions and also commercial privileges to the Church, such as the collection of tolls. Because of its status as the ecclesiastic heart of the community, treasure steadily flowed into the houses of God, for safekeeping, to win hearts and minds, and even, occasionally, as tokens of genuine devotion. To give just one example, on

17 April 869, Salomon, Duke of Brittany, bequeathed to the abbey of Redon:

a golden chalice of fine gold and marvellous craftsmanship, set with 313 precious stones, and weighing 10 pounds and 1 solidus, a matching gold paten with 145 jewels, weighing 7½ pounds, also the text of the gospels with a wonderfully made gold cover weighing 8 pounds, set with 120 precious stones, and a large gold cross of astonishing workmanship, 23 pounds and with 370 jewels.

Inventories of ecclesiastical treasuries list gold and silver plates, crosses, reliquaries, lamps, ornaments and bullion, and the offerings of the faithful were continually adding to the total. The sums which could be raised in this way were considerable; according to a note appended to an inventory of the estates owned by the abbey of St Riquier in 831, the offerings at the tomb of the saint amounted to no less than 300lb of silver per week.

Such material wealth was no doubt a source of great temptation to its custodians, and the moral character of the clergy during this period was not above reproach. Abbot Cernus, a deacon in the abbey of Saint-Germain-

des-Prés, whose *Bella Parisiacae Urbis* is our primary source on the defence of Paris against the Norsemen, concedes the flaws as well as extolling the positive qualities of a fellow cleric who was prominent in rallying his flock and risking his own life on the front lines: ‘In this feat, Ebolus, that fighting abbot, did brightly shine; if not for his greed and lewdness, he was fit for all exploits, since he was renowned for his knowledge in letters and grammar.’

These accumulated treasures, amassed over generations, made abbeys and monasteries prime targets for the Viking raids. ‘Churches and estates have been set ablaze’, the *Capitulary of Pîtres* lamented in 862. ‘The bodies of the Saints, our protectors, have been exhumed from the tombs where they rested … the servants and handmaidens of God have been expelled from their houses … the offerings of the faithful and sums paid for sins, given to holy places, have all been removed from the kingdom.’

Regino’s account of the raid on his own monastery of Prüm is representative: ‘The Northmen entered the monastery, pillaged everything, killed some of the monks, butchered most of the servants, and led the rest away as captives.’ There was a clear pattern of Viking attacks taking place during major festivals in the Christian calendar, which attracted large crowds of the devotional and penitent, making the haul of slaves taken consequently greater. The Norsemen deliberately timed their raid on Nantes in 843 for 24 June, which was St John the Baptist’s Day. Their predatory instincts were sharp, for they knew the city was undefended, Count Rainald of Nantes having been killed in battle with the Bretons on 24 May. Exactly a month later, according to a contemporary account contained within the *Chronicle of Nantes*, after the Vikings ‘disembarked from the ships and surrounded the city from all sides’, they immediately began to ‘loot, ravage, and lay waste’. Bursting into the Cathedral of the Apostles Peter and Paul, ‘They struck with their swords the unwarlike and unarmed crowd, they raged against Christ’s flock’, many being ‘killed over the altar itself, in the manner of sacrificial animals’. Bishop Gunhard, ‘an upright man filled with piety’, died in this manner; legend has it he was saying mass when he was struck down, having just reached the *Sursum corda*, ‘Lift up your hearts’, from the preface of the Eucharistic liturgy. His exemplary behaviour in the face of death earned him sainthood and martyrdom in the Catholic Church. The Norsemen then turned on his congregation, the only survivors being ‘those who they hauled off to their ships as captives’.

This taking of hostages for ransom could be just as remunerative as the looting of physical treasures, the more prestigious the prisoner the better. In 841, the abbey of St Denis paid 26lb of silver to buy back 68 captives from its estates on the Seine, but in 858, the same institution handed over the largest sum recorded for a ransom, 688lb of gold and 3,250lb of silver, for their abbot, Louis, a grandson of Charlemagne who was also the royal chancellor, and his half-brother, Gauzlin, abbot of the great monastery at St Maur-sur-Loire.

The pride invested into their swords by those who commissioned their manufacture is reflected in the names they bore – *Gunnlogi* ('Battle flame'), *Bloðgangr* ('Blood-letter'), *Brynjubitr* ('Armour-biter') – and in the central role they play in skaldic verse. (Getty)

Those taken captive who lacked wealthy benefactors were destined for the slave markets. The *Annals of St Vaast* describe the Great Heathen Army 'killing the servants of divine worship by hunger or the sword, or selling

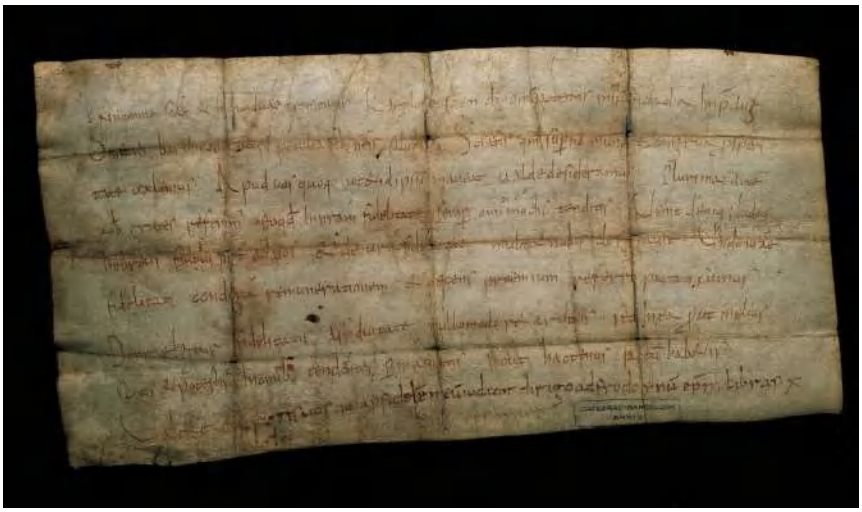
them across the sea'. One of the most vivid accounts of such tribulation comes from the pen of Bishop Adelhelm of Sées, who wrote that 'in the very year of my ordination I was delivered into the hands of that most cruel people, the Northmen, who held me captive in bonds like a common slave, then sold me overseas… Only after many indignities at their hands, and frequent beatings which they inflicted upon me, after diverse perils on rough and stormy seas, after extreme cold, nakedness, and terrible hunger, as well as the hardships of a long journey, did it please the compassion of our Lord and Saviour to permit me to return to the land of my birth.'

The Norsemen would accept protection money up front to spare a sufficiently browbeaten community from the trouble of being sacked, but they could be quite opportunistic in parsing the fine print of any contracts they imposed. At Poitiers in December 863, a Viking army agreed to spare the town in return for a ransom, only to sack and torch the monastery of St Hilarius because it lay outside the town walls and so, for the Vikings, outside the terms of the agreement as they understood them.

Men both secular and divine looked about them for security, and found none. Abbot Hilduin of St Martin in Tours, the arch-chaplain of Charles the Bald, had stashed his abbey's material goods at Orléans, only to become convinced that city also was too exposed to Viking attention. He wrote to Abbot Lupus Servatus of Ferrières, begging him to take the treasures of St Martin into his safekeeping. In his reply, Lupus pointed out in no uncertain terms that his abbey was no safe haven for any man's worldly assets:

> It is not surprising that you thought your treasure might safely rest with us, for you did not know our situation. If you had, you would not have dreamed of sending it here… Access to our monastery looks difficult, I know, for those pirates, although for our sins nothing far away fails to be easy for *them* to reach, nothing hard is for *them* impossible. To tell the truth, our defense is very weak; and their greed to seize is simply sharpened by the knowledge that we have only a few men to stand against them. They can rush upon us from cover of our woods, to find no fortifications and only a handful of defenders. Then, once more hidden in the depths of the forest, they can flee with their prizes where they will. So be prudent and send your treasures elsewhere.

From personal experience, Lupus was only too aware of how the tumults of the age made life hazardous even for men of the cloth. During the war between Charles the Bald and Pepin II of Aquitaine, the abbot had been captured at the battle of Toulouse and held prisoner until he was ransomed.



An edict on the original parchment from Charles the Bald to the people of Barcelona, dated 875–77. The description of Charles the Bald in the *AnnalsofXanten* as 'suffering frequent onslaughts from the pagans, continually offering them tribute and never emerging victorious in battle' owes more to political rhetoric than historical reality. Charles defeated a Viking army besieging Bordeaux in 848, and eight years later he won a resounding victory in the forest of Perche. In 873, he successfully besieged the Vikings at Angers, forcing them to surrender on terms and depart his realm. (PRISMA ARCHIVO/Alamy Stock Photo)

The Viking incursions were not in any sense a holy war, for the Norsemen had come seeking only gold and glory. The concept of forcibly converting those they raided to the worship of Odin would have been utterly alien to them. While only too happy to deprive such victims of property, liberty, even life, they were indifferent to the fate of their souls. Conversely, the fathers of the Church, who bore the brunt of Norse aggression, consistently failed to mobilize any collective Christian solidarity in response to the heathen threat. Pope John VIII described Charles the Bald in 876 as 'ready to fight the Northmen for the liberation of the Church of God, and striving to force the enemies of Christ's cross to final surrender'. But such rhetoric was entirely divorced from reality. Their ability to wage war compromised by the chronic regionalism endemic to the feudal system and always prioritizing their dynastic ambitions in relation to each other, the Carolingian monarchs never brought the full might of their realms to bear against the Norsemen, let alone cooperated with each other in doing so. If anything, only too often they encouraged the pagan warlords to take advantage of a rival king's weakness, or used them to humble an over-mighty vassal.

A Viking runestone, featuring a longship in the lower panel and the all-father god Odin in the upper panel (note his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir). The Norsemen undertook raids for pecuniary reward, but hoped their deeds would be immortalized in stone or song. (Getty)

For many, this incessant jostling for power between squabbling magnates, in addition to the depredations of the Vikings, only emphasized how the inheritance of Charlemagne had been squandered by the misgovernment of his successors. The imperial dream was failing, and the question, as Abbo asked, was - why? ‘O France, tell me, I pray you,’ he demanded, ‘what became of your strength and might, with which you once could overcome and subdue kingdoms that were often far stronger than you?’. There was a widespread tendency among Carolingian writers to regard the Viking invasions as a punishment for Frankish sin in fulfilment of biblical prophecy. As the writer of the late 9th-century *Ludwigslied* put it, ‘He lets the heathen sail across [the sea] to punish the Franks for their

sins.' The Frankish bishops' pronouncement at the Synod of Meaux and Paris (845–46) had made this explicit:

> Wherefore, because obedience did not follow God's commands, as was necessary, the Lord sent 'from the north', from which, according to the prophet, 'evil shall break forth', apostles befitting our merits, namely those cruel and most savage persecutors of Christianity, the Northmen, who, coming as far as Paris, showed what God commanded.

Although adhering to the official line that God was punishing their sins through the Viking assaults, many amongst the clergy saw no incompatibility between this belief and the need to take practical defensive measures such as constructing fortifications and stockpiling weapons. Abbot Hilbod fortified the monastery of Noirmoutier in 830, and the community of St Germain-des-Prés started building up its stock of arms following the Viking raid of 845, supposedly after being instructed to do so by Saint Germanus himself. When the Norsemen descended upon Orléans in 854, the resistance was led by Agius, Bishop of Orléans, and Burchard, Bishop of Chartres.

Precedent for these actions had been established by those clergymen who took a leading role in the defence of their flocks against the predatory wolves of past ages. When the authority of the Western Roman Empire collapsed during the 5th century, it was the clergy who stepped into the breach, taking responsibility for the secular as well as spiritual welfare of the successor states. This extended to diplomatic and military initiatives. Aignan, Bishop of Orléans, led the city's defence against Attila the Hun in 451, stalling for time with negotiations while hastily shoring up the city's gates and walls and dispatching messengers to the patrician general Flavius Aetius, seeking his aid. During the Merovingian era, Milo, Bishop of Trier and Rheims, and Bishop Gewilib of Mainz campaigned with Charles Martel, while in literary tradition, the archetypical warrior-priest was embodied by Archbishop Turpin of Rheims, one of the last three Franks left standing at the pass of Ronceveaux in the *Song of Roland*. This epic affords him high praise, celebrating 'his mighty battling and his goodly sermons… [N]ever did another priest say mass who did with his own strength so great deeds of arms.'

The Viking threat inspired a new generation to take up the cause of the church militant, men who did not hesitate to sponsor, or even lead, armed resistance in order to protect their flocks by pitting force against force. The grammarian Sedulius Scottus, driven out of his native Ireland by Norse

raiders, sang praises to his patron, Bishop Hartgar of Liège, and his 'band of young men', thanks to whom 'the rebel Northman disgorges his bloody plunder'. Some clergymen undertook proactive defensive strategies on a scale no less ambitious than those of their monarchs. The *Vita Bernwardi*, detailing the life of Bernward, Bishop of Hildesheim, recounts how he succeeded in neutralizing the assaults of the Vikings, who had been laying waste to the surrounding region, by constructing a fortress at the confluence of the Aller and Oker rivers.

Throughout the Carolingian era, churches and monasteries retained stocks of weapons and armour with which to equip their military retainers (*militesordines* ), depicted here in the *LiberIMachabaeorum* . However, the Church, as a substantial landowner, also owed duty in the royal host, contributed in the form of units rather than individuals. The fact that the Vikings found so many important monasteries and abbeys completely defenceless during the course of their raids is perhaps explained by the absence of their *milites* doing service with the royal host. (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

However, Carolingian attitudes concerning the role of the clergy in directly confronting the pagan incursions of the Vikings were in actuality conflicted. In 882, a Frankish force jointly led by Count Adalard of Metz, Bishop Wala of Metz and Archbishop Bertulf of Trier was defeated by Viking raiders at Remich on the Moselle, Wala being killed in this engagement. It must be noted that any cleric who participated in battle did so against the express orders of the Church. The *Annals of St Bertin* expressed no sympathy for Wala, who was '*contra sacram auctoritatem et episcopale ministerium armatum et bellantem*' ('bearing arms and fighting,

contrary to sacred authority and the episcopal office'). Nonetheless, in the following year, Archbishop Liubert of Mainz led a small force that killed a number of Vikings and recovered their plunder. One wonders if Wala was being censured more for the disastrous outcome than for his having taken up arms in the first place, for it was always God who gave the victory, as Hincmar informed Charles the Bald: 'Victory in warfare is given by the Almighty through his angel to whom he wishes and to whom he ordains.' Conversely, defeat was ascribed to the loss of divine favour: 'God's judgement thereby revealing that what had been done by the Northmen had not been accomplished by man's strength, but by God's.'

Cavalry in combat, from the *LiberIMachabaeorum* . The capacity of an army to maintain command and control of its cavalry arm was hard-earned through intensive regular drill. Nithard describes the equestrian exercises staged in imperial war games (*ludos*), where Saxons, Gascons, Austrasians and Bretons 'rode at each other in a fast gait, as if they wanted to attack each other. This side, turning around and with their shields protecting [their backs], pretended to want to escape from their pursuing comrades, and vice versa again sought to pursue those whom they [before] were fleeing, until finally both kings [Charles the Bald and Louis the German] with all the youth, with enormous shouting, galloping horses and brandished spears surged forward and pursued first the one and then the other party.' (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

Men of the cloth thus continued to lead their communities in resisting incursions by the pagan Norsemen. In 884, an army under Archbishop Rimbert of Bremen-Hamburg annihilated a Viking raiding party at the Battle of Norditi, and as late as 891, when Viking raiders defeated a Frankish army, Bishop Sunderolt of Mainz was recorded as being among

the slain. There is a direct line from these individuals through Bishop Odo, who served in the front ranks alongside his brother, William the Bastard of Normandy, at the battle of Hastings in 1066, to Bishop Jerome of Périgord, a companion and chronicler of the Cid, and the warrior clerics of the crusading holy orders of the Templar, Hospitaller and Teutonic knights.

## Weapons and warriors

Warfare in the 9th century was more of an art than a science, and more of a gamble than an investment, as Sedulius Scottus put it very clearly:

> In the arms and rumblings of war there is great instability. What is more uncertain and unstable than military campaigns, where there is no sure outcome to the wearisome combat and no victory assured, where often illustrious men are overthrown by lesser ones, and where equal misfortunes sometimes befall both sides, who both expect victory but in the end enjoy nothing but calamitous miseries?

Even if they never saw combat, the mustering of large numbers of men in and of itself posed a considerable risk to every community involved. In 877, ‘a terrible malady’ (possibly whooping cough) followed the army of East Francia home from campaign, where ‘many coughed up their lives’.

The Carolingian war machine operated on multiple levels. Carolingian policymaking, including military strategy, was determined by the inner council (*magistratus*), which comprised the king and his expert military advisors (*consiliarii*). The core of a Carolingian army was the military household (*comitatus*, or *obsequium*), which consisted of the loyal retainers to a king or magnate, who surrounded him at court and accompanied him on campaign. Though the king maintained these household troops as a ready-reaction force on a permanent basis, there was no standing army as such, a royal host being mobilized for the duration of a specific campaign, as for example in 845, when Charles the Bald ‘ordered that the whole army of his kingdom should, once summoned, mass together to fight’. Every man who could afford to go on campaign was ordered to join the army, and those owning a horse had to bring a mount as well. The less well-off had to pool their resources, enabling one man to serve with the help of up to four others, while the poorest free men, the *pauperi*, although exempt from conscription, contributed to financing the war effort through the payment of the army tax, the *hostilitium*. In addition, those at the bottom of the social scale were also required to work on the construction of new fortifications and bridges, and to perform guard duty in forts and border posts.

Count Vivian presents the Bible that bears his name to Charles the Bald, in this 9th-century miniature. Note the arms and armour of the guards flanking the emperor, which presumably represent parade costume not suitable for service in the field. Stylistically, these are clearly derived from classical models, but the helmets are distinctively Frankish. Note also that Charles appears far from bald. The extent to which this was to humour a monarch's vanity, or whether the moniker was ironic, is still debated. (Getty)

These distinctions would be waived in the event of foreign invasion (*lantweri*), when, as Charles the Bald decreed in his 864 *Edict of Pîtres*, 'all shall come to the defence of the fatherland, without any excuse'. Inevitably, such crash mobilizations would result in fighting units of wildly variable age, experience, training and morale. Boys might expect to receive rudimentary instruction in self-defence from their fathers, but there would

be little or no drill in formation fighting, so battlefield tactics typically amounted to the lowest common denominator of holding the line in a shield wall until one side broke, as attested in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*:

> The Vikings attacked first. After their battle cry,
> they loosed … from their hands the file-hardened spear,
> the sharp-ground lances to fly…
> Bows were busied – shield met point.
> That rush of battle was bitter – warriors fell.

Local defence militias were also hamstrung by their lack of cavalry, owning a horse being the exclusive preserve of the elite, which degraded mobility, scouting and logistics. Typically, when the common people at Prüm turned out to fight the Northmen in 882, there were no horsemen, only ‘a countless mass of foot-soldiers, gathered together from the fields and villages into a single unit’. Lamentably, because they were ‘not so much unarmed as lacking any military discipline’, they were slaughtered by the Vikings, as Regino of Prüm described it, ‘not like human beings but like brute beasts’. Conversely, when local peoples did successfully rally to the defence of their communities, the very fact their independent action represented the potential for autonomous action attracted an unwelcome imperial response. This was evident in 859, when, according to the *Annals of St Bertin*, a number of communes ‘formed a sworn association among themselves and fought bravely’ against Viking incursions on the Seine. However, ‘because their association had been made without due consideration they were easily killed by our more powerful people’.

Long before the mid–late 9th century, the Merovingian throwing axe (*francisca*) and single-edged short sword (*semispatum*, some 65–80cm in length), had been phased out in favour of the Carolingian double-edged longsword (*spatha*), which was usually 90–100cm in length, of which the blade represented some 75–80cm. On earlier swords, the edges had run parallel for most of the length of the blade. During the Viking Age, however, the edges of the blade were tapered gradually from hilt to tip, with the result that the centre of gravity shifted toward the sword grip, making the weapon significantly more manoeuvrable and facilitating swordplay. (PRISMA ARCHIVO/Alamy Stock Photo)

The royal armies which opposed the Vikings – while enforcing the writ of regal authority domestically and defending the borders against the claims of rival Carolingian dynasts – were of necessity better organized, being comprised of individual squadrons (*scarae*) at least in principle answerable to a centralized command. However, in practice these were closer to the *comitatus* private armies maintained by the rival hierarchs of the dying Western Roman Empire, and maintaining discipline could be a serious issue even amongst the king's household troops. For instance, in 868, Charles the Bald sent his 20-year-old son, Carloman, into Neustria with a single *scara*

to help the Bretons repel a Viking incursion on the Loire. Hincmar of Rheims drily noted that this force 'laid waste certain territory but did nothing useful against the Northmen whom they had been sent to resist'. This was symptomatic of the age, reflected in the bitter remark of the author of the *Epitaphium Arsenii* that 'nowadays no-one leads fighting-men at his own expense, but instead maintains them through violence and theft'.

The significance of the contribution levied upon the clergy by the Carolingian war machine is specifically referenced in Charlemagne's letter to Abbot Fulrad, in which he gives instructions to the abbot that his men should take nothing on the march from the countryside except for fodder, wood and water, because they should have brought three months' supply of food along with them, in addition to cartloads of tools and weaponry. As Hincmar of Rheims made clear, under Charlemagne's successors, up to about 40 per cent of a bishopric's or abbey's income was expected to go to military provisioning of the king's forces.

This burden only increased with time. According to the *Indiculus Loricatorum*, an imperial chancery memo from 981 listing the 2,030 reinforcements mobilized by 49 of Emperor Otto II's magnates for his Italian campaign, only 20 of those magnates were secular, the majority being from abbeys (11) or bishoprics or archbishoprics (18). The lay magnates contributed 556 men, the ecclesiastical magnates 1,474. Just five of the latter – the archbishops of Cologne, Mainz and Treves, along with the bishops of Strasbourg and Augsburg, who each sent 100 men – contributed nearly a quarter of the total between them.

Nor were military obligations only relevant in times of national emergency; they were an institutional feature of ecclesiastical life. One of the quarters of the town of Centula, outside the great monastery of St Riquier, was reserved for the monastery's mounted *milites*, numbering about 110. These would have been constantly on patrol, and not infrequently in skirmish-level action, for even in the absence of Norse raiders, a lay or ecclesiastic lord with extensive domains like St Riquier needed to maintain a constant military presence in order to uphold the social contract. The tasks these *milites* could be expected to fulfil on any given day would include securing the highways from brigands; protecting key infrastructure such as mills, forges and bridges; escorting diplomats, dignitaries, merchants and tax collectors; delivering messages; corralling

escaped livestock; and keeping down the wolf, deer and wild boar populations.

When the winds and tides were in the Norsemen's favour, even Carolingian cavalry (depicted in this scene from the *LiberIMachabaeorum* ) could not outpace Viking ships on the major rivers, such as the Seine and Loire. The only certain way to alert a community to the threat of approaching Vikings before they arrived at their target was by signalling or dispatching relays of couriers. (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

Those mustered to defend the fatherland against Viking incursions could at least count on being reasonably equipped. Carolingian weapons and armour were well-regarded, and were at the centre of a flourishing arms trade that spanned the length and breadth of Europe. The reputation of master craftsmen such as Ulfberht was such that swords inscribed with this name have been found from Iceland to Russia. In his 864 *Edict of Pîtres*, Charles the Bald decreed: 'Anyone who shall give a coat of mail, or any sort of arms, or a horse to the Northmen, for any reason or for any ransom, shall forfeit his life without any chance of reprieve or redemption, as a traitor to his country.'

The total length of a Viking sword was generally 90–95cm, rarely over 1m. The blade constituted 70–90cm of the total length, and the hilt the remaining 12–18cm. The blade was usually 5–6cm wide, the widest recorded example being 6.5cm. The total weight was usually just over 1kg. Norse sources tell of both belts (*lindi*) and shoulder straps (*fetill*) being utilized as options for carrying a sword. (PRISMA ARCHIVO/Alamy Stock Photo)

As swords were expensive, the spear was the predominant weapon carried by both foot soldiers and horsemen, being used as a thrusting and not a missile weapon. Those who could afford it would be kitted out in a helmet (*helmus*) and chainmail armour (*byrnie*), while the very elite might be accoutred with armoured gauntlets (*manicae* or *wanti*), armguards (*bauga*) and leg armour listed in the *Lex Ribuariam* under the name *bagnbergas* (*bagn*: 'leg'; *bergas*: 'guards'), such as the tight scale leggings depicted in the *Stuttgart Psalter*. The common infantry and cavalry were not expected to possess body armour, but the major urban centres and monasteries boasted sufficient wealth to maintain garrisons and military retainers more properly kitted out, typically in scale armour, composed of small overlapping metal plates attached to a jerkin or skirt.

The cheapest piece of defensive equipment available to any Carolingian soldier was his shield. Constructed of wood, being round or oval and concave, shields ranged up to 80cm in diameter, protecting the body from the neck to the thighs. Most of the shields depicted in Frankish sources have an onion-shaped sugarloaf boss, while many are also decorated with a series of radial arcs comprising metal strips riveted to the wooden shields for extra strength and protection, connected to an iron rim, similarly fastened by rivets.

An assortment of weapons that could have been borne by a single Norse warrior on campaign: sword, knife (of a straight-backed, single-bladed style known in Old Norse as a *sax*), battle-axe and two spearheads. The heads of smaller throwing spears were just 20cm long, almost as short as an arrowhead, but the strongest thrust-spears could have heads over 70cm in length. Note the metal shield boss, the only surviving component of the shield, the wood and leather having perished. (Artokoloro/Alamy Stock Photo)

Battle itself was more a test of will than of skill. Representations in contemporary popular culture – film, television and videogames – notwithstanding, the experience of combat was less defined by individual prowess than by collective effort. Though raids, skirmishes and ambushes would allow for a more fluid environment and genuine one-on-one duels,

the default tactical formation utilized by all the nations of Western Europe in set-piece battle was the shield wall (*skjaldborg* in Old Norse). Carolingians and Vikings alike would ride whatever horses were available whenever possible while on campaign, but the Norse would dismount to fight. Each similarly armed and accoutred, victory would go to that side which, through superior experience, leadership and morale, could stand the pressure of face-to-face fighting longest and best. In the press of the front line, situational awareness counted for much more than superior physique or epic skill with a blade. The fatal blow was as likely to come from a spear wielded by a foe several ranks deep in the enemy's formation as it was from the man directly in front of you. If there was little space for initiative, there was none for chivalry. It would take another thousand years before the Marquess of Queensberry Rules were drafted, and in the meantime, blows below the belt were perfectly acceptable. The bones of a Norse warlord excavated from the Gokstad grave mound in Norway offer compelling evidence that Dark Age warfare was as opportunistic as it was brutal. The skeletal remains of the deceased, who was slain in combat around 900, indicate he was well proportioned, roughly 6ft (1.83m) tall, and strong muscled. Clearly, his opponent(s?) focused on immobilizing him by directing their blows under his shield and into his legs. The right fibula (calf bone) had been cut straight through with an oblique blow from above, severing his foot. His left shin bone bore a cut, about 4cm long, which was made with a thin-bladed weapon, more probably a sword than an axe. His right thigh bone carried a mark from a cut made by another bladed weapon. He did not long survive these wounds; there are no signs of healing. The cut in his right thigh alone would likely have severed his femoral artery, from which he would have quickly bled out.

Victorious cavalry pursue their defeated rivals across a river and from the field, in this scene from the *LiberIMachabaeorum* . While the outcome appears clear cut, it could be that the supposedly routed side are in fact luring their opponents into an ambush via the tactic of the feigned retreat. A good officer had to be able to differentiate opportunity from entrapment, and to always maintain control over the men under his command. A warning of the price to be paid when the cavalry did not exhibit proper discipline is contained in the *Annales* of Einhard for the year 782 in its description of a battle on the Dachtelfeld in the Süntel uplands of Saxony: 'As fast as each rider's horse could carry him, every single one of them galloped forward post-haste at the Saxons arrayed in front of their fort, not in the manner of attacking a formed-up enemy, but as if they were chasing after men fleeing, to win spoils. Since it was badly conceived, the fight went badly; as soon as battle was joined, they were surrounded by the Saxons and nearly all killed.' (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

For obvious reasons, therefore, in order to avoid running the risk of sharing such a fate, Norse warlords would habitually prefer negotiation to fighting wherever possible. In that sense, the fearsome visual panoply of the Viking warrior and the dissemination in the sagas of his reputation for quasi-mythical ferocity were gambits intended to break the will of a targeted community so that plunder could be accumulated in an orderly fashion through tribute, as opposed to the protracted and potentially problematic endeavour of looting. It must be remembered that a Viking raid was essentially a business enterprise. While achieving notoriety for some memorable deed that might be recounted around campfires over the years would certainly be welcome as a gratifying bonus, the overwhelming majority of those men signing on for a Viking raid did so in order to get rich, not famous. There was no shame, therefore, in offering terms to the

foe. Before fighting commenced at Maldon in 991, the Vikings tried to offer their Anglo-Saxon foe an honourable alternative to the ensuing bloodbath:

> And it is better for you
> that you pay off this spear-fight with tribute
> than that we engage in such a hard fight.
> Nor have we any need to kill each other.

After their victory, the Vikings pressed forwards via the River Thames to London, from which they extorted *danegeld* of 10,000lb in silver. They returned to extract additional lump sums of protection money in 994, 1002, 1007 and 1012. The alternative was to risk storm and sack, which London had already been subjected to in 842 and 851, or siege, as occurred in 1013 and 1016.

Norse battle-axes and spearheads. ‘Never let go of your spear in the formation unless you have two,’ the *Kongespeilet* advised, ‘for one spear is better than two swords for fighting in

the field.' Metaphors for the spear in Old Norse include *fleinn* ('tear, claw'), *svaf* ('bringer of sleep') and *hræmaki* ('maker of corpses'). (Getty)

It was a consistently similar story on the Continent. The *Annals of St Bertin* record that the Vikings in 852 sailed with 252 ships to Frisia, where they demanded tribute. When this was paid, they departed without inflicting any damage. They spared Orléans on similar terms in 868. Viking raids might therefore be said to operate according to a tripartite model. If a targeted community was small, poorly defended, caught unawares or otherwise vulnerable, it could be subjected to an immediate sack. If the community was large, well-defended, fully mobilized or otherwise judged a tough nut to crack, it might be offered terms. If these were rejected, the community in question might be bypassed if the rewards were assessed as not being worth the risk, or subjected to a full-spectrum assault, including a protracted siege if necessary. Such was the fate of Paris in 885. Having repudiated the demand for tribute pressed by the Vikings when they mustered under its walls, the city was thereafter forced to endure what remains the longest siege in its history.

# INITIAL STRATEGY

## The fury of the Northmen

The first sporadic Viking raids on Carolingian territory began during the waning years of Charlemagne himself, but the threat truly metastasized during the reign of his son and successor, Louis the Pious. The incessant squabbling between this emperor and his sons left the outer fringes of Frankish territory wide open to attack, particularly coastal Frisia and its trading ports of Dorestad, Walcheren and Witla. Dorestad, an especially attractive target because of its significance as a market town and mint for imperial coinage, was sacked annually in 834, 835 and 836. Louis 'made arrangements for effective defence of the coasts', the *Annals of St Bertin* note, but these clearly failed because in 837 the Norsemen again 'fell on Frisia with their usual surprise attack'. They may have done so silhouetted by the light of Halley's Comet, which spanned half of the night sky that year on its closest ever recorded approach to the Earth. According to the *Vita Hludovici Imperatoris*, Louis devoted himself to prayer and penance, fearing that 'by this token a change in the realm and the death of a prince are made known'. More constructively, the *Annals of St Bertin* record Louis advancing in person to Frisia, where he summoned a general assembly and held a public inquiry 'with those magnates to whom he had delegated the task of guarding that coast. It became clear from the discussion that partly through the sheer impossibility of the task, partly through the disobedience of certain men, it had not been possible for them to offer any resistance to the attackers.' The emperor subsequently replaced the local authorities with 'strenuous abbots and counts' better qualified to organize and rally resistance. Louis also turned to diplomacy. He forged an alliance with the King of Denmark, Horic, who was anxious to restrain the predatory instincts of other Northmen for fear their prowess as Vikings might endow them with a popular base of support wide enough for them to emerge as potential contenders for his throne. At the same time, in a fox-guarding-the-henhouse approach, Louis co-opted into imperial service those Norsemen willing to offer their prowess in battle to his cause. The effectiveness of these measures was reflected in the absence of attacks on Dorestad in 838,

839 and 840, and in the correspondingly large output of the Dorestad mint, which actually peaked during the emperor's last years.

Fated to live in the shadow of his father, Louis the Pious was still a fine administrator and warrior. His greatest challenge was not the threat of invasion but rather ambitious adult sons. The latter always-latent menace came to the boil when Louis determined to bypass his three oldest sons and name Charles, his youngest son by his second wife, as his heir. The aggrieved brothers – Lothar, Louis and Pepin – seized and dethroned their father in 833 at the Field of Lies, banishing Charles and dividing the realm. (Noble Numismatics, **www.noble.com.au**)

Oleg of Novgorod's campaign against Constantinople, from the 15th-century *Radziwill Chronicle*. While Norsemen from Norway and Denmark were raiding Europe or settling across the Atlantic, the Varangians from Sweden headed east to colonize what would become Russia. Predictably, Oleg's attempt to storm Constantinople in 907 failed; if the

Vikings could not overcome the relatively humble defences of Paris, they would stand no chance of penetrating the mighty walls of the Byzantine metropolis. (Getty)

However, the situation dramatically worsened when Louis died in 840, shattering any possibility of a unitary response to the worsening Viking threat. The Carolingian realm was now divided between three sons. Louis the German emerged as King of East Francia, Lothair I as King of Middle Francia and Charles the Bald (then just 17 years old) as King of West Francia. As each brother was obsessed with reforging imperial unity at the expense of the others, their endemic conflict and the concomitant collapse of centralized authority opened up the heartland of Western Europe to Viking raiders, who immediately took full advantage. 'Their disagreement gives strength to foreigners', the monk Ermantarius observed from his monastery on the Atlantic island of Noirmoutier; 'the defence of the shores of the ocean is abandoned.' Dorestad, for example, was subjected to another raid in 846, and after the cousins Rorik and Godfrid Haraldsson seized the port in 850, Lothair I had to acknowledge Rorik as his nominal suzerain with authority over most of Frisia. However, according to the *Annals of Fulda*, despite his pledge that he would 'faithfully handle the taxes and other business pertaining to the royal fisc, and would resist the piratical attacks of the Danes', Rorik was unable to keep the Norse intruders at bay, Dorestad being sacked by two different Viking warbands in 857 and 863.

Civil strife rages in this scene from the *Liber I Machabaeorum*. The internal dynastic discord of the Frankish magnates throughout the 9th–-10th centuries could be no less traumatic than the external Viking threat. The *Annals of St Bertin* record how Lothair I 'raged everywhere' fighting against his father and brothers, and accuse him of 'looting, burning, rape, sacrilege and blasphemy.' (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections)

On 14 May 841, Rouen was subjected to 'pillage, fire and sword', according to the *Annals of St Bertin*, and the monasteries of Jumièges and St Ouen were left in flames. In 842, the Northmen captured the market town of Quentovic, where they massacred the inhabitants. In 843, Norse *piratae*

sacked Nantes. The following year, they entered the River Garonne and proceeded to raid all the way to Toulouse. The first assault on Paris came in 845, after a fleet of 120 longships under Ragnar (tentatively identified with Ragnar Lodbrok, the quasi-legendary hero of the Norse sagas) entered the Seine at the beginning of March. Having again despoiled Rouen, where, according to the *Translation of St Germain of Paris*, they 'did what they wanted, captured and killed people of both sexes, devastated monasteries, plundered and burned churches', the Norsemen made their way up the Seine, laying waste to all in their path.

Charles the Bald mobilized and advanced to confront the intruders, but made the fatal mistake of dividing his force to cover both banks of the river. The smaller section was defeated in detail at Charlevanne. In the aftermath, the Vikings hanged 111 captives in full view of Charles and his men, taking this opportunity 'to insult and laugh at' the emperor. The demoralized Frankish army promptly disintegrated, its companies deserting in droves despite being well equipped, 'provided with helmets, armour, shields and lances', while the people they fled from were 'unequipped and almost unarmed, and very few'.

The Norsemen subsequently entered an undefended Paris on Easter Sunday, 29 March. The monastery of St Germain-des-Prés was burned as well as sacked. Bereft of any means to offer further resistance, Charles, 'grieving and sad and beating his youthful breast, retired from the scene'. The militarily impotent monarch was forced to offer Ragnar 7,000lb of silver in order to buy him off from proceeding any deeper into Frankish territory. While the Norsemen did depart on 18 April, the terms of the agreement did not stop them from devastating, plundering and burning on their way back to the coast, taking with them captives and the booty they had accumulated. Ultimately, this availed them little, for they had contracted some epidemic disease over the course of their debauchery, which killed Ragnar and many of his men while they were at sea. In order to prevent this pestilence from spreading throughout his realm, King Horik of Denmark had the surviving Vikings massacred and ordered the Frankish slaves they had taken returned to their homeland.

The shaped prow of a Norse longship. Prows were decorated with ornaments depicting the visage of a dragon or other fell creatures. Such iconography was intended to enhance the terrifying reputation of these sea wolves, making targeted communities more inclined to settle on terms than risk a fight. Serendipitously making their appearance even more ominous, Norse longships might be tarred for protection against the elements. (Getty)

In a conspicuous break with precedent, when Charles the Bald demanded his subjects swear an oath of loyalty to him in 854, he was the first Carolingian ruler to specify that those swearing the oaths were Franks (*Franci*), and not merely the aristocrats and elites, but the *liberi homines*, the 'free men', clearly distinguished from those of lower social status, labelled as *villani*, *coloni* or *servi*. Accordingly, to be free was to be a Frank, placed in a direct relationship with the king himself, the *rex Francorum*. In this were the first stirrings of a distinctly Frankish – and ultimately French – nationalism. (Noble Numismatics, **www.noble.com.au**)

But the Norsemen kept coming, underlining the fact there was little the legitimate rulers of their kingdoms could do to stop them. In 847, Lothair, Louis and Charles met at Meersen in a bid to patch up their differences.

This failed, but they did agree to send envoys to Horik, ordering him to restrain his people from attacking the Christian realms; otherwise, the *Annals of St Bertin* solemnly assert, 'he should be in no doubt at all that they would make war on him'. This warning did nothing, however, to halt the Viking incursions, and the threat of retaliation came to nought, as the brothers immediately turned on each other. Horik, meanwhile, was killed in a civil war in 854, which did little to advance the cause of effective government in Denmark. The strife in their own communities, with its inevitable disruption of trade and agriculture, only encouraged more Norsemen to go in search of sustenance and income, if not fame and fortune. The embattled Carolingian kingdoms bore the brunt of this augmented piratical endeavour, their cities and monasteries left in flames year after year; on 28 December 856, it was again the turn of Paris. After the success of this raid, the Vikings would remain established on their downstream island basecamps for many years.

The year 857 was a particularly savage one. The Northmen on the Loire sacked Tours and the surrounding area up to the stronghold of Blois. Seizing this opportunity, the former King Pepin II of Aquitaine, who had been deposed by Charles the Bald in favour of his son, Charles the Fat, allied himself with these raiders, who sacked Poitiers and ravaged the countryside. That summer, Paris was attacked for a third time, and again it was put to the torch, along with the churches of St Peter and Ste Genevieve and every other holy site aside from the cathedral of St Stephen, the churches of St Vincent and St Germain and the church of St Denis. According to the *Annals of St Bertin*, 'a great ransom was paid in cash to save these churches from being burned'.

Chartres, Evreux and Bayeux were pillaged in 858, Bishop Baltfrid of Bayeux being slain in the attack on that city, while Bishop Frotbald of Chartres abandoned his flock only to drown while trying to swim to safety across the River Eure. The failure of Charles to defend his realm led to mass defections when Louis the German invaded West Francia that same year. Because this crisis further degraded what was left of Carolingian military capability, the Vikings were granted an even freer hand to continue their depredations. In the summer of 859, the year Viking raiders entered the Mediterranean, a warband of Northmen encamped on the Seine took Beauvais, killing Bishop Ermenfrid, and then Noyon, killing Bishop Immo.

Meanwhile, a second warband raided in the Somme area, plundering and burning Amiens and the monastery of St Valery.

Charles the Bald sincerely sought to neutralize the Viking menace. However, while the Norsemen were an endemic irritant, it was his own peers who were an existential threat. In 858, responding to appeals from key magnates in West Francia, Louis the German, King of East Francia and Charles's half-brother, invaded West Francia. Charles was forced to break off his siege of a Viking raiding party. Louis' army disintegrated and he was forced to seek refuge in Burgundy and then to depart to deal with threats on his own frontier. The two siblings were – uneasily – reconciled at Koblenz on 7 June 860. (Noble Numismatics, **www.noble.com.au**)

In January 861, the Northmen who were wintering on the Seine returned to Paris and burned it yet again, along with the churches of St Vincent the Martyr and St Germain the Confessor. The library of St Germain-des-Prés was lost in the fire. Charles was forced to offer another Viking warband 5,000lb of silver and a large amount of livestock and grain in return for driving the established raiders out of West Francia. However, this accomplished, the newcomers simply took up the role of raiders themselves. It was at this juncture that Charles hit upon the novel, and effective, tactic of constructing fortified bridges across the Norsemen's river highways in order to hem them in and bring them to heel. Through this gambit he at last succeeded in clearing the Seine.

Meanwhile, Salomon, Duke of Brittany, hired a dozen Norse ships and their crews for service against his Frankish rival, Robert the Strong, Count of Anjou, only for Robert to capture this fleet on the Loire and then partner with those Vikings who had fled the Seine against Salomon, paying them 6,000lb of silver and offering an exchange of hostages in order to secure

their at least transient loyalty. Such were the shifting alliances and opportunities of the era. Robert, who had sided with Louis in 858, had been reconciled with Charles in 861 and appointed Margrave of Neustria, only for Salomon to incite Louis the Stammerer, eldest son of Charles, against him the following year. Robert saw action against two Norse warbands in 863, being wounded on the second occasion; in 865, he smashed a Viking raiding party returning from looting Poitiers that was burdened with its plunder. On 18 October that year, the Northmen on the Seine pillaged the monastery of St Denis, while those on the Loire joined forces with the Bretons and attacked Le Mans, sacking it without opposition.

The following year marked yet another degrading low point for the Franks. Early in 866, the Northmen advanced up the Seine to Melun, where although the local garrisons had superior numbers, they fled without a fight. Charles was forced to impose a levy on every free Frank in the realm to raise 4,000lb of silver in tribute. In addition, he had to return any slaves who had escaped after being taken by the raiders following the agreement, and pay compensation for any Vikings who had been killed according to the price they demanded. Frisia and Brittany were also despoiled, Le Mans was sacked again and Bishop Actard of Nantes was enslaved and taken abroad in chains.

Bourges was looted and burned in 867, while in 868, the Northmen ventured up the Loire to Orléans, burned it and, after extorting a tribute payment, returned to their ships unscathed. Contemporaries like Ermantarius resorted to apocalyptic terms in describing the tribulations of their times:

> The number of ships grows; the endless stream of Vikings never ceases to increase. Everywhere the Christians are victims of massacres, burnings, plunderings; the Vikings conquer all in their path, and no one resists them; they seize Bordeaux, Périgeux, Limoges, Angoulème and Toulouse. Angers, Tours and Orléans are annihilated and an innumerable fleet sails up the Seine and the evil grows in the whole region. Rouen is laid waste, plundered and burnt; Paris, Beauvais and Meaux taken, Melun's strong fortress levelled to the ground, Chartres occupied, Evreux and Bayeux plundered, and every town besieged.

While the masts of these longships are raised, the sails are furled, implying they are approaching shore. Each warrior onboard is fitted out with a helmet and coat of chainmail (*hringabrynja*), which could be short (*stuttr*), stopping at the hips and not covering the arms, or long (*síðr*). (Getty)

Ermantarius was at least writing from a position of relative security; in the 820s, a rampart had been built around his monastery after it had been targeted repeatedly by Norse raiders sailing across from the Irish Sea. These raids continued up to and beyond the death of Charles on 16 October 877, and his son and successor, Louis the Stammerer, on 10 April 879. His two young sons divided West Francia between them, Louis III taking the north (Neustria) and Carloman II the south (Aquitaine), but were able to cooperate enough to march together against the Northmen on the Loire and

defeat them on 30 November, killing many and driving others into the River Vienne.

The monogram of London on the reverse of this silver penny issued by Alfred the Great reflects his turning of the tide in the struggle for England. With Anglo-Saxon resistance stiffening at the end of the 870s, the Vikings turned increasingly to the Continent in search of easier prey. (Classical Numismatics Group, **www.cgncoins.com**)

Unfortunately for the Franks, Norse raiding throughout continental Europe intensified in the early 880s. This was owing to the changing balance of the ongoing struggle between the Norse and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms for control of England. Whereas previously the post-Roman Frankish and Anglo-Saxon realms had evolved on parallel but quite separate tracks, from the 9th century onwards, through the agency of the Norsemen, their destinies would become ever more intimately intertwined, a process that would culminate in the conquest of England in 1066 and the ensuing rival dynastic conflicts for control of a combined Anglo-French kingdom that played out during the Hundred Years War. All of this began in 865, two centuries and a year prior to the battle of Hastings, when the Viking host known as the Great Heathen Army (*mycel hæþen here* in Old English) disembarked in England. By 878, this force had subjugated all but one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and the last holdout, Wessex, was on the verge of collapse. Its king, Alfred, was driven into the Somerset marshes and reduced to fighting a guerrilla campaign of resistance. From this low point, Alfred succeeded in rallying his *thegns*, winning the critical battle of Edington and forcing the Viking king Guthrum to accept terms. This sudden reversal of fortunes impelled many Norsemen, especially later arrivals in

England, to depart for the Continent in the hope of taking advantage of easier prey. This was a recurring pattern throughout the Viking era. Whenever prospects were more favourable on one side of the Channel, the raids would increase against that shore, only for the tide to reverse as resistance stiffened. Under the leadership of Gudrød Haraldsson, opportunists and outcasts from the Great Heathen Army made landfall between Calais and Boulogne in 879 and sailed north to Ghent, where they established a winter camp.

Vikings arriving in England, by Abbo of Fleury (*c.*945–1004). The kite-shaped shields are anachronistic, as the Vikings appear nearly always to have used round shields. The wooden shield-plate comprised seven or eight planks glued together edge to edge, with an iron shield-boss to protect the hand. Lightweight pine and spruce was the preferred structure, with a layer of hide (most probably rawhide) glued onto the front and back. Note the ramps used in facilitating the disembarkation of the warriors to shore. (Getty)

Gudrød scored a great victory against local forces on 2 February 880 in the battle of Lüneburg Heath, defeating and killing Duke Bruno of Saxony along with a broad swathe of the Saxon nobility and the bishops of Minden and Hildesheim. But later that month, the Vikings blundered into the royal army of East Francia under Louis the Younger at Thiméon and were roughly handled, only being granted a reprieve because they managed to wound and take prisoner the king's only son, the bastard Hugh. Louis hoped to ransom him back, but that night Hugh died and the Norsemen slipped away.

Two armies face off in this scene from the *Liber I Machabaeorum*. The force on the left is supported by an imaginative interpretation of war elephants, depicted by an artist who has clearly read about, but never actually laid eyes on, a pachyderm. (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

To meet this threat, King Louis III of West Francia assigned command of his army to his archchancellor Gauzlin, who according to the *Annals of St Vaast* attempted to catch the Vikings in a pincer movement by splitting his

force and advancing on both sides of the River Meuse. However, these separate detachments failed to coordinate their movements and did not converge on the enemy simultaneously. When the division under his direct command was subsequently routed, Gauzlin ‘barely escaped through shameful flight, while most of his men were captured and cut down’. In the aftermath, everyone living between the Scheldt and the Somme fled, taking the relics of their saints with them, for the Norse ‘spared none, not even the aged, but destroyed everything with sword and fire’. At the beginning of October, Gauzlin, with insufficient strength to resist the Norsemen and unable to maintain an army in the field over winter, disbanded his force. The following month, the Norse settled in for the winter by constructing a fortified camp at Courtrai, from which they sacked and burned Cambrai and the monasteries of St Vaast and St Gauderic on 28 December, returning to their encampment ‘unscathed and unimpeded’, the *Annals of St Vaast* bitterly recorded.

The armament expected to be carried by Charlemagne's cavalry was specified in two texts. The *Capitulare Mistorum* of 792–93 referred to benefice and office holders who were able to possess horses and armour, as well as shield and lance, longsword and short sword. In the letter sent by Charlemagne to Abbot Fulrad in 806, each horseman was commanded to have a bow and several quivers of arrows in addition to the shield and lance, sword and *sax*. The infantry was not required to be so heavily armed: the *Capitulary of Aachen*, issued in 802–03, expected the counts to supply each of their foot-soldiers with a shield and lance as well as a bow with a spare string and 12 arrows. (St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 22, pp. 140–141)

From February to July 881, the Northmen crossed the Somme and were reported to have destroyed everything in their path as they moved up to Beauvais. Louis III crossed the River Oise and pitched a camp at Laviers near Abbeville to block their advance. He repulsed the raiders on 3 August in a battle at Saucourt-en-Vimeu, where he 'triumphed most gloriously over them', according to the *Annals of St Vaast*, a victory significant enough to

be celebrated in the epic poem the *Ludwigslied*, but one nearly undone when the Franks, celebrating too hard in the aftermath, were surprised by a determined Norse riposte which killed many of their number and nearly routed the rest. Had Louis ‘not managed to imbue them with steadiness and courage, by dismounting his horse, they would have turned in disgraceful flight’. But once again, the victory of one Frankish kingdom only came at the expense of another. Instead of continuing west, the surviving Vikings simply doubled back on their line of march into East Francia, sacking Cambrai, Utrecht, Cologne, Bonn and any monasteries in their path, including that of St Lambert at Liège. They even took possession of the old imperial palace at Aachen, stabling their horses in the chapel built by Charlemagne.

European swords during the Viking epoch were made by welding together rods of iron and steel, which were then folded, twisted and forged to produce, after polishing and etching, a herringbone or other pattern. The most sought-after were those in the Ulfberht style (seen here), which were made of a single piece of hypereutectoid high carbon steel and likely imported via the River Volga from Persia. The Viking trade routes thus contributed to globalization and innovation in weapons technology. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The rapid turnover of the Frankish leadership did not aid their cause. Louis the Younger died on 20 January 882, followed by the teenaged Louis III. According to the *Annals of St Vaast*, the latter, 'because he was young', was chasing a young woman who 'fled to her father's house, where, in jest, Louis pursued her on horse through the doorway'. In the process, 'he broke his shoulders on the door lintel, and his breast on the saddle of his horse. He subsequently began to languish and was carried to St Denis, where he died on 5 August.' Meanwhile, Carloman II was occupied with imposing his authority over the breakaway territory of Provence under its king, Boso. Unchecked, the Norsemen roamed at will in the Rhineland, putting Trier to the torch on 5 April, then advancing up the Moselle towards Metz, winning a decisive victory on 11 April at Remich on the Moselle, Bishop Wala of Metz being among the slain. Consequently, as Lupus lamented,

> so among us the sword of barbarian men rages, unsheathed from the scabbard of the Lord! And we, wretched creatures, live as though paralyzed, not only among the hideous evils done by savages, but as well among the wars fought without pity between our own peoples, amid sedition and fraud. Day by day men's hearts burn with new ardour to commit greater and more wicked crimes!

Charles the Fat, who had already succeeded one brother to become King of Italy in March 880, inherited a second kingdom two years later when he succeeded another brother, Louis the Younger, to become King of East Francia. However, his intervention against the Northmen was inauspicious. He bought off one Viking leader, Godfrid, through legitimizing his conquests by appointing him Duke of Frisia (succeeding his cousin, Rorik, who had been appointed to the role under similar circumstances more than three decades earlier), and handed 2,412lb of gold and silver in protection money that he had raised from the treasury of St Stephen at Metz and other ecclesiastical establishments to another leader, Sigfrid, who was encouraged to depart with his warband for the territories of Charles's young cousin, Carloman II.

The King of West Francia responded with spirit, smashing the Norse at Avaux on the River Aisne. However, the Vikings again eluded the royal army and proceeded to subject the whole kingdom up to the Oise to iron and fire, destroying walled towns and burning monasteries and churches to the ground without encountering any Frankish resistance. In 883, the Northmen advanced to Amiens, where they wintered, laying waste to the surrounding territories between the Seine and Oise rivers while Carloman II did nothing to resist them. 'The Norsemen did not cease to capture and kill the people of Christendom, tear down churches, destroy walls and burn villages', the *Annals of St Vaast* lament. 'There were no places where the dead did not lie, and distress and anguish were everywhere … one could see the destruction of the Christian people to the point of extinction.' Early the following year, the invaders demanded an enormous tribute of 12,000lb of gold and silver, and gave the Franks until October to raise it. Though the Vikings actively continued raiding throughout the interval, 'plundering in the customary manner', they departed once their tribute had been paid.

The imperial seal of Charles the Fat. Born in 839, the son of Louis the German, Charles was raised in East Francia and only inherited the throne of West Francia in 884 when he was 45 years old. He thus had no emotional connection to Paris, a fact that may have played a role in both his sluggish response to the Viking threat and his compromised resolution to the siege of the city. (Bridgeman Images)

On 12 December 884, the 18-year-old Carloman II was mortally wounded while hunting with some of his retainers in the forest of Basieu near Corbeil. The magnates of West Francia subsequently invited Charles the Fat to take the vacant throne. Thus, Charles inherited a third kingdom, reuniting the entire Carolingian realm, validating the decision of Pope John VIII on 12 February 881 to recognize him as Emperor Charles III. Theoretically, this endowed one individual with enormous military power, more than enough to annihilate any Viking warband with the temerity to stray onto his territory. In reality, it granted a largely symbolic title to a figurehead whose overriding concern was imposing his authority over a vast and unsettled domain where the centrifugal forces of regional loyalty kept the flames of separatism constantly simmering. The distant emperor was no more of a threat to aspiring Vikings than the weak kings he had succeeded. Far from being intimidated, the Norsemen drew up plans for a campaign in 885 that would be their most ambitious yet.

# THE PLAN

## The battle of the bridges

From Ragnar to Rollo, many Norsemen would walk the line between history and myth. The chronicles relate the exploits of Hasting (also known as Hæsten, probably Hásteinn in Norse), most famous for having sacked an Italian city after infiltrating it by faking his death and hiding in a coffin – a ploy obviously inspired by the legend of the Trojan horse. Even setting aside the more fantastic elements of his narrative, Hasting's career did reflect the geographic range of the Viking era, he being recorded as participating in raids on the Loire before 882, between the Seine and Scheldt until 892, and finally in south-eastern England, where he died in or shortly after 893. However, contrary to depictions in popular culture, which owe more to the Norse sagas than Norse history, Viking warriors were not intrinsically superior to those of any other peoples in Dark Age Europe. Where they did excel was in appearing out of apparently nowhere, hitting a target before an effective local defence could be organized and then disappearing before regnal or even provincial authorities could intervene or intercept them. The secret to their success was mobility, which was derived from a peerless mastery of nautical technology and technique.

King Alfred the Great as he wanted his subjects to appreciate him in 883, on the obverse of a silver penny from the mint in London. Stylistically, the portrait is based on late Roman types, much finer than anything produced since the days of Offa a century earlier. Alfred's issue of such fine silver pennies in London after the city was recaptured from the Danes in

883 reflected a new-found English confidence after years of incessant Norse pressure. (Classical Numismatics Group, **www.cngcoins.com**)

On the water, the Norsemen were in a class of their own. The seafaring capacity of Catholic Europe, by contrast, was mired in utter stagnation. There is indeed no evidence that any Carolingian ruler ever deployed a naval force at sea against the Scandinavian threat. By definition, this left the Carolingian realms in a permanently reactive posture to Viking incursions, which could only be countered once the raiders had made landfall. By contrast, the Saxon King Alfred the Great (r. 871–99) constructed an English fleet that enjoyed some success in its home waters against Viking raiders in 875, 882 and 885.

Norse accounts ascribe the raids and expeditions of the Viking era to the youth and passion of the *drengir*, a term 13th-century Icelandic historian, poet and statesman Snorri Sturluson applied to 'Young men that have not settled down, while they are making their fortunes or reputation… Manly and ambitious men.' More specifically, skaldic verse and runic inscriptions describe members of the same Norse ships' crew as *félagi*, the root word for the modern 'fellow', which in its original context might be translated either as 'shareholder' or 'comrade'. In this sense, the Vikings anticipated the freebooting, wildcat capitalist ethos of a later generation of nautical marauders, the Conquistadors, whose preferred term for themselves was *compañero*, 'partner' or 'companion'. Each ship's crew would have had a distinct corporate collective identity, forged in a shared geographical origin and perhaps even blood ties, and reflected in visual markers, unique patterns incorporated in anything from the tattooing of their bodies to the filing of their teeth.

The signature seagoing vessel of the Vikings was the longship. A standard model, based on the excavated example at Gokstad, measured 23.33m long and 5.25m wide amidships. The shallow draft of only 0.85m when fully equipped made the vessel ideal for coastal amphibious operations, and the *Annals of Fulda* for 854 lament 20 years of continuous raiding that 'had cruelly afflicted with fire and slaughter and pillage those places on the borders of Francia which were accessible by ship'. But the displacement of 30 metric tons when such vessels were fully loaded made propulsion by oars difficult, and thus not suitable for shallow water navigation. Viking river ships more closely resembled the vessel excavated

at Ladby (20.60m length, 2.9m breadth, with a draft of 0.7m), or the Skuldelev 5 wreck (17.3m length, 2.5m breadth, with a draft of 0.6m). Flotillas of these warships, with a complement of roughly 30 men each, accompanied by swarms of small boats, were ideal for penetrating upriver under oar power on raids deep into the heartlands of Western Europe. From the 9th century onwards, they would be a constant and ominous presence on the Rhine, Loire and Seine.

Comprised of oak or pine, Viking longships were clinker-built, the hull being constructed by lashing or nailing its overlapping planks together from the keel up. The provision of a longship was the indispensable first, and most expensive, component of any Viking raid. Only the great magnates of Norse society were in a position to meet this need, which automatically endowed them with leadership of the expedition, first claim to the lion's share of its rewards and perhaps the approbation of their peers in epic poetry: *hrósak því es hlenna dolgr glæsir herskip* ('I praise the fact that the enemy of thieves embellishes warships'). Some individuals had private fleets at their disposal. Vessels owned by Óláfr Tryggvason included the *Ormr inn langi* ('Long Serpent'), *Trana* ('Crane') and *Visundr* ('Bison'). (Petter Ulleland/**CC-BY-SA-4.0**)

In addition to the regular oscillation between the ebb and flood current, and the challenge presented by the tidal bores of spring, the meandering course of the Seine – particularly in those two sections of the river where the oxbows or curves are most prominent, between Saint-Wandrille and Rouen (65km), and then upstream, from the confluence of the Seine with the Oise to the Île de la Cité (63km) – complicated the passage of invasion fleets, for the current flows faster on the inside of a curve than on the

outside. This feature would have forced the crews to row at different speeds to round these turns. The islands within the river also slowed the Norse advance, especially from Rouen to Paris. Clusters of islands appear first in the vicinity of Oissel, just upstream from Rouen. Another group comes into sight a short distance upstream from Pont de l'Arche, while other concentrations of islands lie in the Jeufosse–Bonnières area and near Mantes-la-Jolie and in the Seine from Meulan upstream to Paris. The continuous chain of islands from Mantes-la-Jolie upstream to the Île de la Cité may have required an invasion fleet to row in single file.

Vikings portage a longship through Russia. Shallow-draft Viking vessels could be navigated into most waters, and as they were relatively light they could even be taken overland for considerable distances. Small boats could be dragged, or picked up and carried by the crew via poles inserted through the oar locks. Full-sized longships might have to be transported across rollers. This aided the Vikings' ability to strike out of apparently nowhere and the constant threat they posed deep in the interior of Eurasia. (Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Images)

On the other hand, these islands did provide the Northmen with the ideal locations on which to set up secure base camps along their invasion route. They could hardly have chosen a more strategic site than Jeufosse for a naval base (*longphort*). The width of the river at this point and its banks, which consisted of elevations rising up to 130m, combined to render the islands difficult to attack from their flanks.

Thus, while the great rivers of France could serve as the vital highways along which raiders could strike deep into the rich interior of the country,

this mode of warfare incorporated two critical strategic drawbacks: lack of speed, and lack of flexibility.

The first drawback was made apparent in the first Viking raid on Paris in 845. Although bulk cargo transport in the pre-industrial era was much more cost-efficient by water-borne conveyance as opposed to horse-borne cart, even light and fast longships travelling upriver along the curves of the Seine were no match in terms of speed for a horse-borne courier travelling overland. Having entered the river, the Northmen pillaged Rouen at the beginning of March. They then progressed to Charlevanne, located on the Seine opposite Bougival, where they found a Frankish army, originally mobilized at St Denis just north of Paris, waiting for them. The overland distance between Rouen and St Denis is 140km and could have been covered by a courier on horseback in five days. Given the slow Norse advance upriver, their mobility further impeded by the necessity to forage, if the courier were dispatched as soon as the Northmen had been sighted at Rouen, Charles the Bald would have had three weeks to mobilize an army and advance to confront the invaders at Charlevanne.

Unable to bring their own mounts on campaign, beginning in at least 853, Norse raiders would make it a priority to acquire horses once they arrived in Carolingian country in order to enhance their own mobility. In the spring of 858, Vikings based at Jeufosse launched a twin-pronged cavalry raid against the two great monasteries on the outskirts of Paris, with one party riding north of the Seine towards St Denis and the other heading south of the river towards St Germain-des-Prés, each intending to seize and hold for ransom the respective abbots during the Easter celebration of 3 April. The raid on St Denis was successful, but the local military authorities, now alerted to the fact marauders were active in their vicinity, were able to intercept the Norse horsemen targeting St Germain-des-Prés, who had longer to ride. More raids on horseback would follow. In 866, an alliance between Salomon, Duke of Brittany, and the Danish Viking Hastein established an island naval base at St Florent-le-Vieil on the Loire and then rode 100km north with 400 warriors to sack Le Mans. During their return journey, they were cut off at Brissarthe by a Frankish force under Robert the Strong, Count of Anjou, and Ranulf I, Duke of Aquitaine, who forced the raiders to seek the temporary shelter of a church. The besieged Vikings sallied out and in the fierce fighting to repel them, Robert, who had pursued the Vikings right to the church door without wearing either helmet or coat of mail, was

killed. The Vikings dragged his body into the church and barricaded themselves in again, but not before one of their number shot Ranulf off his horse with an arrow. Completely demoralized by the loss of both their leaders, the Franks raised the siege and drifted away, allowing Hastein and his men to make their escape. Robert's then nine-year-old son, Odo, would figure prominently in the future course of events.

Cavalry in action, from the *Liber I Machabaeorum*. Cavalry could be decisive in battle, but only if used correctly. Against infantry, cavalry would ideally only attack a formation already in disarray, preferably when it was fleeing, or by assaulting it from the flank or rear. Conversely, a cavalry charge might have the psychological effect of causing infantry to disintegrate or flee before it, but the inevitable result of cavalry charging into disciplined and tightly formed-up infantry would be disastrous. As an alternative, against a determined foe, cavalry could wheel in and out, using javelins or bows to create gaps in an enemy shield wall formation or provoke undisciplined counter-attacks. (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

Of course, the Norse always had the cheaper and more reliable option of raiding on foot, such as in 855 and again in 865, when footslogging Norsemen advanced to Poitiers. On both occasions, however, these slower-moving columns were intercepted and roughly treated.

The second critical drawback inherent to a strategy of advancing – and withdrawing – by river was that if those routes became blocked then the entire campaign could fall to pieces. Charles the Bald was the first Carolingian monarch to seize upon this possibility, trapping a Viking raiding party on the Marne in early 862 by repairing the bridge at Isles-lés-

Villenoy that barred their passage downstream and stationing *scarae* on either side of the river.

Encouraged by the success of this improvised initiative, the king assembled his magnates at Pîtres in June 862 and ordered the construction of fortifications (*munitiones*) on the Seine, 'so that the Northmen could not ascend that river', the *Annals of St Bertin* recorded. The location chosen was at Pont-de-l'Arche, where the Seine narrows to 150m in width at its confluence with two tributaries, the Andelle and the Eure, and a bridge already extended the road from Rouen to Evreux across the river. In the 9th century, it represented the first bridge which a Viking fleet entering the Seine would encounter, and it was therefore the first point at which the king could hope to stop them.

The project entailed the bridge being reinforced and supported by fortifications on both banks. However, construction had not been completed when the Norse next rowed up the Seine in 865, and the northern stronghold was not yet garrisoned, for the raiders occupied it and then pushed right past it on their way to pillage the monastery of St Denis north of Paris, where they spent about 20 days stripping it of movable wealth, carrying booty to their ships each day before returning to a nearby base camp. They eventually exited the Seine in July 866 after extorting a ransom of 4,000lb of silver. Nonetheless, the incomplete defences did show some teeth, for the Franks held the fort on the south bank. When more than 500 Norsemen set off to sack Chartres, they were attacked by the garrison and after incurring casualties retreated back to their ships.

Construction of the fortifications at Pont-de-l'Arche continued until 873. Ado of Vienne offers the fullest description of the completed bridge, which he portrayed as of astonishing strength (*mirae firmitatus*) and protected at either end by skilfully supported fortresses (*positis in utrisque capitibus castellis artificiossime fundatis*). In these strongholds the king stationed garrisons for the defence of the realm (*in quibus ad custodian regni praesidia disposuit*). He had invested tremendous physical and political capital in this structural defence, but lived long enough to see it fail. In 876, another Norse raiding party broke through to St Denis. Charles was forced to offer them 5,000lb of silver in order to prevent them from once again despoiling the monastery.

## The supreme test

We don’t know how much the obstacle at Pont-de-l’Arche featured in Viking strategic planning for the great raid of 885, because no accounts from their perspective have survived the intervening centuries. Of the two men recognized by the Carolingian chroniclers as leading the expedition, Sigfrid was the one bribed by Charles the Fat in 882 to depart his kingdom and unleash the fury of the Northmen on West Francia instead. This focused on Rheims, which was effectively defenceless since its fighting men were on campaign under King Carloman II. The distinguished archbishop and author of the *Annals of St Bertin*, Hincmar, fled their advance by night, taking with him the body of St Remigius and the treasures of the cathedral. ‘While the canons, monks and nuns scattered in every direction’, Hincmar, who in his advanced age had to be ported in a chair, only just managed to escape across the Marne, finding refuge in the village of Épernay, where he died on 21 December. The Norse vanguard, which had advanced right up to the gates of Rheims, ravaged everything they could find outside the city, and burned a number of small villages in its vicinity. Carloman II hit this detachment while it was still isolated from the main body ‘with as many men as he could muster’, according to the *Annals of St Bertin*; ‘A large number of those Northmen who were carrying off booty were slain and many of them were drowned in the Aisne.’ The king then confronted the larger Norse host, which halted at Avaux. That evening, ‘as soon as the moon gave them enough light’, the Vikings slipped away. The precise role Sigfrid played in this course of events is unknown but, the somewhat ambiguous conclusion to the foray notwithstanding, he seems to have retained enough credit to emerge as the at least nominal head of the much larger and more ambitious expedition of 885. The only other named Norseman associated with the campaign that year, Sinric, has left no other imprint on history.

Coins depicting Norse longships. Norse sails were square, rectangular or trapezoid in shape, raised on to the mast and supported along their upper edge by a horizontal beam dubbed the yard. In the absence of a favourable wind, these vessels would be rowed by

their *skipa sagnir* (‘ships’ crews’). On this basis, the Norsemen both conquered the North Atlantic and drove deep into the interior of Eurasia, with 8,000km separating the Norse camp at L’Anse Aux Meadows on Newfoundland from the other extreme, Bandar Torkaman in Iran. (Getty)

On 25 July, a Viking horde of unprecedented size forced its way to Rouen and proceeded to ravage the countryside around the city ‘with fires, thirsting for destruction, and they killed and took captive the Christian population, they plundered churches with nobody resisting them’, according to the *Annals of St Vaast*. Significantly, this chronicle relates that ‘because their ships had not arrived, they crossed over the river Seine in ships they had discovered on the river’. The implication is the Viking force at this point was campaigning on land, and only later linked up with reinforcements arriving upriver by sea. If so, this would explain the joint leadership of the combined force, with Sigfrid and Sinric being the original commanders of the two separate detachments.

Much of this artist's impression – from the wings on the Viking helmet to the seahorse-style prow on the longship in the background – is pure fiction. However, the small – and overcrowded – boat in the foreground does reflect a basic truth. The Northmen employed many such craft in a variety of roles throughout the siege, not least as shuttles moving men and supplies back and forth across the Seine from one camp to another. (iStock)

In the absence of the emperor, a Frankish army under Ragenold, the Count of Maine and Margrave of Neustria since 878, confronted the Norsemen, only to be defeated, with Ragenold himself being killed. With his death, the army broke up; 'everyone returned to their own lands with great sorrow, having achieved nothing', the *Annals of St Vaast* lament. From this point onwards, Frankish strategy was entirely reactive. Unwilling to risk another open battle, they focused on constructing fortifications on the River Oise at Pontoise under the command of Count Aledramnus of Beauvais while preparing Paris for an inevitable siege.

Contemporary texts suggest that the Franks primarily used their spears as thrusting weapons, rather than throwing them. The spear was the cheapest weapon listed in the *Lex Ribuaria*, costing only two *solidi* together with a shield, though by 850 this price had risen to five *solidi* in places. They were carried by the infantry and cavalry alike. During the reign of Charlemagne, the *Lex Ribuaria* recorded the price of a sword and scabbard as seven *solidi*, and that of a sword alone as three *solidi*. By comparison, a text from late in Charles the Bald's reign put the price of a sword at five *solidi*. Swords were therefore relatively expensive items, which explains why in Charlemagne's capitularies only the cavalry, who could afford to own and maintain a horse, were required to possess swords. Defensive armour, too, was expensive. The *Lex Ribuaria* set a price of six *solidi* on a helmet (*helmus*) and 12 *solidi* on a set of chainmail armour (*byrnie*). Image from the *Liber I Machabaeorum*. (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

In November, the Vikings entered the Oise and laid siege to Pontoise. After they cut off the garrison's water supply, the Franks were in no position to resist, surrendering on the condition they be allowed to leave unharmed. After hostages had been exchanged, Aledramnus and his men withdrew to Beauvais with their horses and arms. The Northmen burned the fortifications after they had taken anything of use the Franks had left behind.

The fact that the Franks garrisoned Pontoise in 885, and that the Vikings took the trouble to divert from the Seine into the Oise in order to neutralize it, emphasizes its significance. Pontoise was a critical connection on the important road from Paris and St Denis to Rouen. By taking Pontoise, the Norsemen were able to degrade the capacity of Frankish troops to march from Neustria to the relief of Paris. The imperial palace at Quierzy was also

on the Oise, upstream to the north; holding Pontoise would block a relief effort from this direction.

The way was now clear to Paris, but it had taken the Northmen the best part of four months to accomplish this. Where had they been in the interval? There is only one logical possibility. Before they could claim Paris, they had to eliminate the threat of the fortified bridge at Pont-de-l'Arche. After advancing upriver to a forward base at Oissel on the Seine, the Vikings could have portaged around this obstacle. But it would have been extremely rash to leave this stronghold in their rear while the walls of Paris lay before them and the imperial army was still at large. The diversion to Pontoise confirms that the Norse were being methodical in their approach. Ultimately, therefore, the investment in Pont-de-l'Arche did pay off. Though the river barricade failed, it bought Paris enough time – barely – to prepare its own defences before the Norsemen arrived.

# THE SIEGE OF PARIS

## The medieval city on the Seine

Paris in 885 was not the capital of the Carolingian realm, and far from its largest urban conurbation, but the city was wealthy and storied, boasting one of the longest records of permanent settlement in Europe north of the Alps.

It was during the Iron Age, sometime around 250 BC, when the Celtic tribe of the Parisii made their home around the cluster of islands 4 miles downstream from where the Marne joins the Seine. The settlement was first described by Caesar in his *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* as ‘a town of the Parissi, situated on an island in the river Seine’. His senior legate, Titus Labienus, fought a decisive battle here in 52 BC. After conquering Gaul, the Romans built the city of Lutetia atop the ruins of the old Parisii settlement. Due to its location athwart an important road nexus, Lutetia grew in importance, becoming the capital of provincial Western Gaul by the end of the 4th century; the emperor Julian was crowned in his ‘beloved Lutetia’ in 360.

A view from the Right Bank of the Seine towards the Île de la Cité, the grand prize for the Viking raiders when they initiated the siege of 885. The key to taking the city was securing the Grand Châtelet tower that protected the Grand Pont bridge where it connected to the shore on the left of this image. (Getty)

After the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the name of the city reverted to Civitas de Parisii, which eventually contracted to Paris. While its political significance diminished, because of its strategic location Paris remained a major hub on those trade routes that survived the economic contraction of the 5th century. The city also cultivated a reputation for piety, beginning in the 3rd century with the martyrdom of St Denis, later venerated as the patron saint of both Paris and France. This tradition was enhanced by St Geneviève, who faced down Attila the Hun in 451 and baptized the Frankish warlord Clovis in 496. It was Clovis who was responsible for constructing the church of St Martin-des-Champs on the Right Bank of the Seine and the cathedral of St Étienne on the Île de la Cité itself. The 7th-century Frankish King Dagobert I added to this panoply of ecclesiastic landmarks by founding the abbey of St Denis as a Benedictine monastery, later complemented by a church, construction of which began in 754 under Pepin the Short and was completed under Charlemagne, who was present at its consecration in 775. According to the *Vita* of St Eligius, the mausoleum of the martyred saint was completed 'with a wonderful marble ciborium over it marvellously decorated with gold and gems'. St Eligius:

A battle scene from the *Liber I Machabaeorum*. The Carolingian realm included a large number of fortified places of various origins, a combination of royal palaces, urban centres and more rural late Roman and early medieval fortresses – dubbed *fluchtburgen* ('flight fortresses') in East Francia – to which the local populace would flee when faced with foreign invasions or raids. (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

> surrounded the throne of the altar with golden axes in a circle. He placed golden apples there, round and jewelled. He made a pulpit and a gate of silver and a roof for the throne of the altar on silver axes... So much industry did he lavish there, at the king's request, and poured out so much that scarcely a single ornament was left in Gaul and it is the greatest wonder of all to this very day.

Such opulence motivated the sojourns of countless pilgrims, but would ultimately attract much less desirable attention. The wealth of Paris, in addition to its location athwart one of the major navigable rivers in France, made it a natural target for Viking raiders. The city was sacked in 845 by Ragnar, in 857 by Björn Ironside, and again in 861. After a quarter-century of relative peace, the supreme test would come in 885, when the Viking host arrived beneath the walls on or about 24 November.

The raiders easily occupied the settlements on both the right and left banks of the Seine, which had been conceded by the garrison as indefensible. Lacking the manpower to establish a perimeter around all of Paris, the Franks elected to evacuate the entire population and make their stand on the Île de la Cité. Even the Île de la St-Louis, which was roughly half the size of its neighbouring island and was used mainly as pastureland, was left undefended. The records give no indication as to whether the Franks opted to burn down the suburbs before the Vikings arrived as a component of a scorched earth policy.

The defensive walls constructed by the Romans on the Île de la Cité largely followed the outline of the island. They enclosed an area of 8 hectares measuring 490m long and 180m wide. Within this space were the royal palace, in which Odo lived, located in the western section of the Île de la Cité, while to the east were the church of St Étienne, to which were joined the Basilica of Notre-Dame and the Baptistery of St Jean-le-Rond; these three ecclesiastical buildings were under the direct rule of Bishop Gauzlin.

The builders attempted to place the walls as close as possible to the water's edge, but the marshy and muddy banks of the Île de la Cité permitted only approximately half of the island to be enclosed. Due to the uneven terrain, the actual height of the walls varied from 12–25ft (3.66–7.62m), placing the top of the wall at roughly uniform level. From 8ft (2.44m) thick at the base, the walls tapered to 6ft (1.83m) at the parapet.

These fortifications constituted the secondary line of defence for the garrison. The primary challenge for the Norsemen to overcome was the River Seine itself; its swift current acted as a natural moat surrounding the

Île de la Cité, which was connected to the left and right banks of the river by two low-slung fortified bridges that barred the raiders from further progress upstream. They could be ported around, but the Vikings would be reluctant to leave an unsubdued, fortified garrison in their rear commanding their primary egress from the heartland of France.

The shorter bridge, the Petit Pont, which linked the island to the south (west) bank, was constructed of wood. Its bridgehead was fortified by a wooden tower dubbed the Petit Châtelet. Aligned with Rue St Denis, the longer, northern span – the Grand Pont – was made out of stone, with crenellations along its length. Its bridgehead was defended by the stone Grand Châtelet tower, which was only partially completed. Nevertheless, its foundations were solid and stood firmly grounded, surrounded by defensive ditches at its base.

The two key figures in the defence of Paris reflected the duality of Church and State in the Carolingian world. The former was represented by Gauzlin, who had succeeded Engelwin as Bishop of Paris the previous year. Over the course of his career, he had straddled the inner circles of both royal and ecclesiastical power, and had accrued much bitter personal experience of Viking prowess in battle. The son of Rorgon I, Count of Maine, Gauzlin – who entered the priesthood as a monk in 848 – had risen to become abbot of the great monastery at St Maur-sur-Loire in 858 when he and his half-brother, Louis, were abducted and held for an exorbitant ransom by the Norsemen. In 860, he joined the chancery at the West Francia court of Charles the Bald as a notary, and succeeded Louis as archchancellor in 867. He accompanied Charles in some capacity on campaign against Louis the Younger of East Francia in 876. Charles was completely defeated at the battle of Andernach on 8 October, and Gauzlin was taken prisoner. He survived, and returned to serve as archchancellor in the court of the West Francia kings Louis the Stammerer and Louis III, a position he retained despite his defeat on the Meuse in 880. He had played a critical role in the ascendancy of Charles the Fat in West Francia, subsequently securing the see of Paris for himself.

Secular authority was vested in Odo, who had probably become Count of Paris in succession to Conrad by the end of 882 or the beginning of 883. His family had not enjoyed an altogether harmonious relationship with the Carolingian court. His father, Robert the Strong, had rebelled against Charles the Bald, and although later ostensibly reconciled, in 868,

according to the *Annals of St Bertin*, 'Those of Robert's *honores* which Charles had granted to his son after his father's death were now taken away and distributed among other men.' The primary beneficiary was Hugh, abbot of Saint-Germain d'Auxerre, a son of Conrad I, Count of Auxerre. After his father died, his mother, Adelaide of Tours, married Robert the Strong, making he and Odo half-brothers. When Robert died, it was Hugh who inherited his adoptive father's abbacies, counties and title as Margrave of Neustria.

Odo had subsequently benefitted from the influence at court of the well-connected Count Aledramnus of Beauvais, whose daughter, Theodrada, he married. Ironically, there was also friction between the families of Gauzlin and Odo. In 861, Charles the Bald had created the March of Neustria and placed it under the authority of Robert the Strong. Gauzlin's brother, Rorgon II, who had succeeded their father as Count of Maine, revolted against Robert, allying with Salomon of Brittany for the purpose. Nevertheless, the shifting kaleidoscope of Carolingian court politics notwithstanding, Odo and Gauzlin were able to put this bad blood behind them and present a united front to the Viking threat. By the time the Norsemen arrived beneath the walls of Paris, Gauzlin had another personal grudge to nurse against them. When Rorgon II died in 865, he was succeeded as Count of Maine by another brother, Gauzfrid. Upon his demise in 878, the title passed to his cousin, Ragenold, who was killed in the encounter with the Vikings outside of Rouen seven years later.

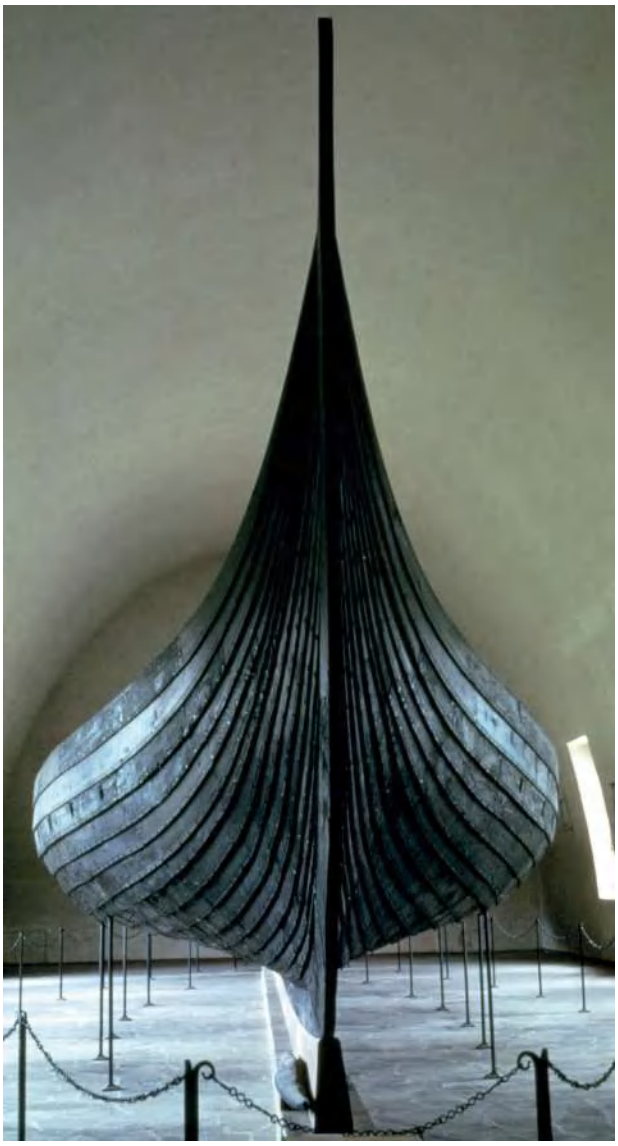
## The Vikings arrive

In reconstructing the siege, we are fortunate to have the account of a contemporary, Abbo Cernus, a native of Neustria who in 885 was a young monk and a deacon (*conlevita*) in the abbey of St Germain-des-Prés on the Left Bank of Paris. In Abbo's own words, 'let no man speak of this fight, as if he knew more. Indeed, no man may speak of these events more truly than I, for I saw everything that happened with my very own eyes.' His narrative of the defence of Paris is chronicled in an epic poem, the *Bella Parisiacae Urbis* (Battles of the City of Paris), which reflects the literary and stylistic affectations of the genre, but nonetheless incorporates a wealth of first-person detail otherwise lacking in the histories of the era.

According to Abbo, the Viking fleet was comprised of 'seven hundred high-prowed ships and very many smaller ones, along with an enormous

multitude of smaller vessels'. This host was so vast that it covered the Seine 'for a distance that extended more than two leagues downriver'. Those watching from the walls 'asked in amazement, "Where had the river vanished?" It could not be seen, hidden, as though by a veil of fir, oak, elm and alder.'

The curving prow of the Oseberg ship. Both ends of the vessel would be similarly shaped, enabling it to easily move backwards in response to any contingency. Under normal circumstances, the stern was distinguished from the prow only by the presence of the rudder. This sat on the starboard side, a word being derived from *stýrbord* ('steering board'), the Norse term for the boards (planks) on the side from which the ship was piloted by the *stýrimaðr* ('steersman'). (Getty)

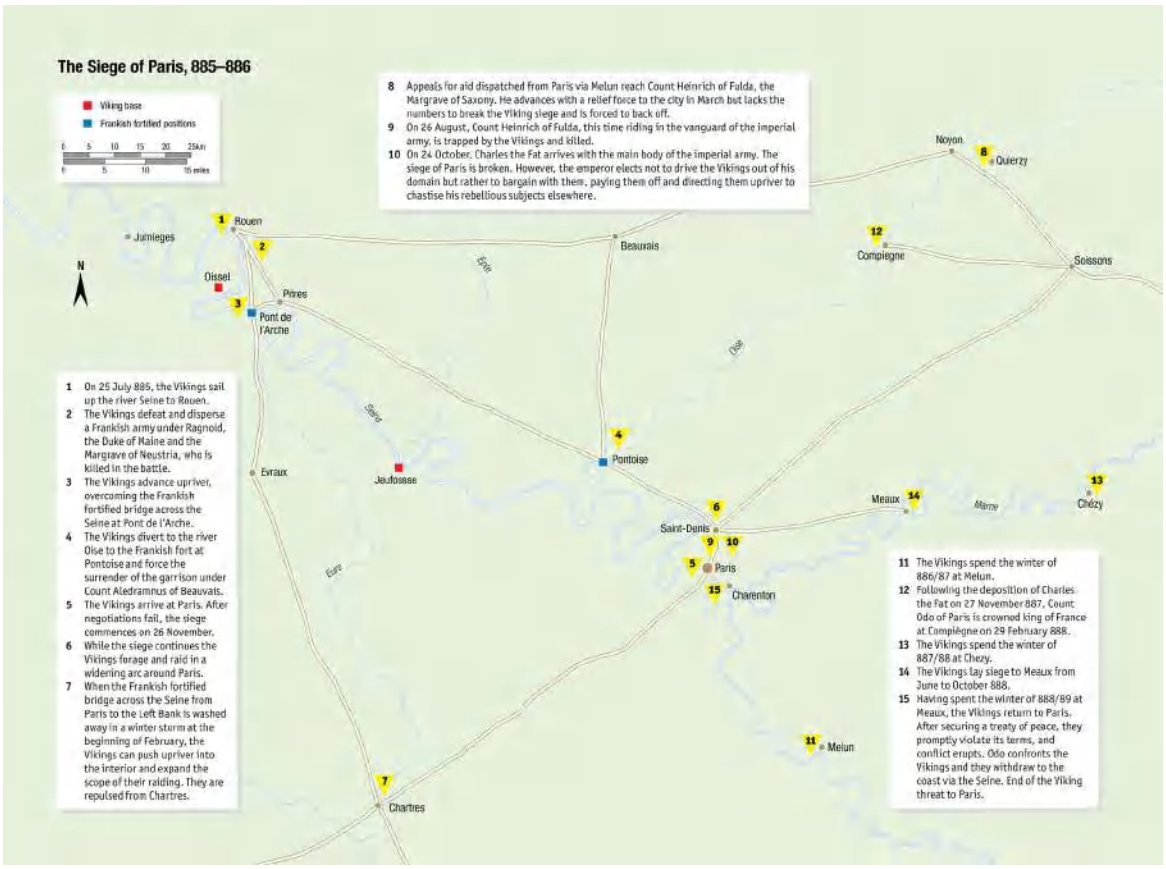


The sleek lines of the Oseberg ship. The final duty of such a vessel could be to serve as the burial chamber of a powerful warlord. When the Gokstad ship was excavated in 1880, archaeologists discovered a burial chamber behind the mast where a chieftain had been interred surrounded by wooden furniture, riding, fishing, sailing and cooking equipment, and a gaming board and horn gaming pieces. The Gokstad burial dates from between 895 and 905, while the ship was up to half a century older. (Getty)

Modern estimates arrive at a rough total of a somewhat more modest 12,000 men in 300 ships. However, this was still a massive incursion, on a scale at least a match for the Viking Great Heathen Army that had carved a Norse domain out of Saxon England just a few years earlier. By contrast, the force defending Paris was a meagre one; only 200 strong, according to

Abbo. He was most likely only counting men-at-arms, who would have been supplemented by the city militia.

Having drawn up their longships on both banks of the Seine, the Norsemen set to work establishing the two camps that would anchor their siege. Standard Viking practice was to surround their camp sites with defensive earthworks by excavating a ditch and piling up the soil to elevate a bank inside it, topped by a gated wooden palisade. Abbo describes the Norsemen busily 'fashioning stakes, gathering stones and earth' to construct their rudimentary fortifications. The pressing need for timber as construction material and firewood ensured Viking lumberjacks were kept continuously busy throughout the siege, and the plains surrounding Paris must have been destitute of trees for many years after the Northmen first arrived. The main camp, which Sigfrid occupied as his headquarters, fronted onto the water's edge on the Right Bank, based on the church and abbey of St Germain L'Auxerrois. The secondary camp on the Left Bank, where Sinric commanded, was established at the abbey of St Germain-des-Prés, further from the city and deeper inland, meaning the Viking ships on the southern shore of the Seine were left relatively unprotected.


The Siege of Paris, 885–886
Viking base
Frankish fortified positions
1 On 25 July 885, the Vikings sail up the river Seine to Rouen.
2 The Vikings defeat and disperse a Frankish army under Ragnold, the Duke of Maine and the Margrave of Neustria, who is killed in the battle.
3 The Vikings advance upriver, overcoming the Frankish fortified bridge across the Seine at Pont de l'Arche.
4 The Vikings divert to the river Oise to the Frankish fort at Pontoise and force the surrender of the garrison under Count Aledramnus of Beauvais.
5 The Vikings arrive at Paris. After negotiations fail, the siege commences on 26 November.
6 While the siege continues the Vikings forage and raid in a widening arc around Paris.
7 When the Frankish fortified bridge across the Seine from Paris to the Left Bank is washed away in a winter storm at the beginning of February, the Vikings can push upriver into the interior and expand the scope of their raiding. They are repulsed from Chartres.
8 Appeals for aid dispatched from Paris via Melun reach Count Heinrich of Fulda, the Margrave of Saxony. He advances with a relief force to the city in March but lacks the numbers to break the Viking siege and is forced to back off.
9 On 26 August, Count Heinrich of Fulda, this time riding in the vanguard of the imperial army, is trapped by the Vikings and killed.
10 On 24 October, Charles the Fat arrives with the main body of the imperial army. The siege of Paris is broken. However, the emperor elects not to drive the Vikings out of his domain but rather to bargain with them, paying them off and directing them upriver to chastise his rebellious subjects elsewhere.
11 The Vikings spend the winter of 886/87 at Melun.
12 Following the deposition of Charles the Fat on 27 November 887, Count Odo of Paris is crowned king of France at Compiègne on 29 February 888.
13 The Vikings spend the winter of 887/88 at Chezy.
14 The Vikings lay siege to Meaux from June to October 888.
15 Having spent the winter of 888/89 at Meaux, the Vikings return to Paris. After securing a treaty of peace, they promptly violate its terms, and conflict erupts. Odo confronts the Vikings and they withdraw to the coast via the Seine. End of the Viking threat to Paris.
Noyon
Quierzy
Rouen
Jumièges
Beauvais
Compiegne
Soissons
Oissel
Pîtres
Pont de l'Arche
Oise
Seine
Evreux
Jeufosse
Pontoise
Meaux
Marne
Chézy
Saint-Denis
Paris
Charenton
Melun
Chartres
Eure

Before the siege of Paris commenced, the rituals of negotiation had to be conducted. Interestingly, Abbo relates that the Vikings approached Gauzlin to bargain for the city's surrender, implying Paris was under ecclesiastical as opposed to secular authority, although this might simply reflect bias on the part of a chronicler whose personal allegiance lay with the Church and its ministers. According to Abbo, Sigfrid urged the bishop to 'show mercy to yourself and the flock given you'. All the Vikings sought was 'consent that we might go our way, well beyond this city. Nothing in it shall we then touch, but shall preserve and safeguard all the honours that belong to you and Odo.' Gauzlin flatly rejected this offer. 'The realm must not suffer by the destruction of this city; but rather this city must save the realm and preserve the peace.' He posed his defiance in terms of a rhetorical question: 'Now, if by chance, these walls were entrusted to you, as they are to us, and you were asked to do all that you have asked of us, would you deem it right and agree?' Sigfrid had to concede, 'By my honour, rather my head were lopped off by a sword and thrown to the dogs.' However, with nothing accomplished by way of parley, there was no alternative but war. At dawn

the following day, the siege would commence, Sigfrid vowed: '"With sunset you shall know hunger's curse. It shall go on for years." Thus having spoken, he went his way and assembled his men.'

A Carolingian-era siege. When the Vikings seized Angers in 873, Charles the Bald swiftly moved against them, establishing lines of circumvallation that cut the city off from resupply or reinforcement. The *Annals of St Bertin* specifically mention the building of a strong palisade (*sepe fortissimo circumdedit*) to encircle the city and protect the Frankish camp from sortie by the besieged Vikings. According to Regino of Prüm, the Franks then brought 'new and exquisite siege engines' to bear upon the city. The Northmen finally surrendered to Charles when his army began to dig a massive trench to divert the course of the River Mayenne in such a way as to enable them to attack the Norse ships moored upstream, which would have stranded the invaders deep in Frankish territory. (Golden Psalter (Psalterium aureum) of St Gall - Psalterium Gallicanum)

As threatened, the siege commenced just after dawn the following morning, 26 November 885. The primary focus for the Norsemen was the Grand Châtelet, which anchored the Frankish defence of the Grand Pont bridge on the northern (right) bank of the Seine. Odo and Gauzlin took

personal command of the garrison at this critical point. Others prominent in the defence included Odo's younger brother, Robert, and Ragenar 'Long Neck', the Count of Hainault. Gauzlin was wounded by a Norse arrow in this initial assault. He survived, but his place in the front line was taken by his nephew, Ebolus, who had succeeded him as abbot of St Germain-des-Prés in 881 after Gauzlin became bishop. In this supreme crisis, Ebolus proved unwilling to follow the example of the Lamb of God in turning the other cheek. According to Abbo, 'With a single spear, he pierced seven Danes all at once, and in jest he said to his own to take them to the kitchen.'

Repulsed, the Norsemen fell back, bearing many killed and wounded back to their camp. That night, under cover of darkness, the Franks worked feverishly to extend the height of the tower, constructing a wooden tier 'raised atop' the stone base of the original bastion, elevating it to 'half as high' again as it had been the previous day. 'Thus, together, the sun and the Danes beheld this new tower' when dawn broke on the 27th, as Abbo recorded. Undeterred, the Vikings renewed their efforts to seize this linchpin of the city's defence:

> Arrows flew here, there through the air; blood gushed and flowed;
> Darts, stones, and javelins were hurled by ballistae and slingshots.
> Nothing was seen, between heaven and earth, but these projectiles.
> The many arrows made the tower, built in the night, groan out.

While some raiders focused on subjecting the battlements to a storm of missile fire, others moved in close, seeking to undermine the walls with iron picks. Recognizing the threat, Odo 'served them up with oil and wax and pitch, which was all mixed up together and made into a hot liquid on a furnace'. This concoction, when unleashed on the Norse intruders, inflicted horrendous injuries, Abbo recording how it 'made their skulls split open'. Those who survived fled in agony to the river's edge, seeking solace in the soothing cold waters of the Seine. The Franks jeered in contempt at the discomfiture of their foe, bidding them immerse themselves completely so that the swift-flowing current might 'restore your flowing manes'.

The grim business of war during the struggle for Paris is illustrated in this depiction. Note the prominent use of bows. The Norsemen were accomplished archers, using their skills to soften up an enemy before closing for hand-to-hand combat. East Anglia's King Edmund was so riddled by Viking arrows that a Church chronicler wrote that he resembled a sea urchin, 'whose skin is closely set with quills'. (Getty)

Demoralized, the Vikings fell back to their camp, only to be greeted with the scorn and derision of their wives and other camp followers, who harangued them into returning to the fray. On this occasion, the Norsemen succeeded in tearing open a gap in the tower's structure. However, their attempts to make further headway were thwarted, first by the garrison, which formed a shield wall in the breach, and then by a cartwheel hurled from the battlements of the tower onto the Vikings below, killing six of them. These were dragged away by their feet and the assault continued, the Northmen now setting fire to the tower's gate. The flames quickly spread, and within an hour the Grand Châtelet had disappeared beneath a pall of darkness. But again, the Norsemen were unable to take full advantage. A

wind favourable to the garrison blew this smoke into the faces of the Vikings, and to rally the defence, two standard bearers raced across the Grand Pont from the city to the battlements of the tower. Abbo describes these standards, borne on lances, as ‘tinted golden with saffron’ – perhaps the earliest reference in the historical record to the Oriflamme, the sacred banner of France. In any event, the Norse forces again fell back, having suffered an estimated 300 slain. Frankish losses were comparatively light.

**Gauzlin exhorts the defenders of Paris**

Smoke rising from the smoldering ruins of looted and burned-out churches on the horizon does little to alleviate the winter chill as the Viking assault on Paris rages. Critical to the defence of the city was the Grand Châtelet, a half-constructed stone tower that guarded the Grand Pont, the stone bridge connecting the Île de la Cité to the Right (north, east) Bank of the Seine. The best-armoured and equipped among the 200-strong force of men-at-arms who constituted the hard core of the garrison would have been stationed here. Losing the tower would have enabled the Vikings to proceed unhindered upriver and press their assault via the Grand Pont against the gate of Paris itself. Note the presence of Gauzlin, Bishop of Paris, rallying and directing the defence. Such was the distracted state of the Frankish realm in the waning years of effective imperial authority that responsibility for military initiative had increasingly devolved to local leadership, ecclesiastical as well as secular. Along with Count Odo of Paris, it was Gauzlin who was responsible for preparing the city to withstand a siege, and throughout the campaign, until his death, he led from the front. In the epic poem that related his eyewitness account of the siege, the monk Abbo of St Germain-des-Prés abbey, who clearly knew Gauzlin first-hand, mourned the loss of the bishop, ‘the mildest of heroes … our firm bulwark, our shield, our two-edged sword … our strongest bow and our keenest arrow’, who ‘Journeyed to the Lord’ on 16 April 886, having ‘sought the stars that he too might be like them’.

## Pillaging

While the Vikings had been stymied in their efforts to storm Paris itself, the adjacent settlements, and all those inhabitants who had been unable to flee into the city for shelter or make good their escape elsewhere, were at the mercy of the raiders. The Norsemen, ‘both on horseback and on foot overran the hills, the fields, forests, open pastures and the villages… The father and the sons and even mothers – they killed them all… The vineyards and the fields suffered the pitiless weight of death.’ While the opportunity for plunder would have been no doubt welcome, the primary objective of these forays was the requisitioning of crops and livestock. In order to secure the 3,500 calories necessary per fighting man, the crew of each longship would require 24–27kg of unmilled wheat per day, or its equivalent in dried or smoked meat and fish. Since the narrow beam of their vessels prohibited the transport of goods in bulk – the basic tradeoff for the manoeuvrability required in river navigation – such essentials could only be secured through foraging in the surrounding countryside. Given the lateness of the season, at least the raiders would not have been obliged to reap the grains themselves, instead targeting those storehouses where the harvest was stockpiled for the winter. Indeed, supply might initially outstrip demand, with

counterproductive results. Viking foragers herded the cattle, swine and sheep they had driven from nearby farms back to their camp at St Germain L'Auxerrois, packing so many beasts into the sacred hall that they swiftly fell ill and died. To prevent disease and dispose of the stench, the corpses were dumped into the Seine, to let the current carry them away safely downstream. Given such ruthless despoilment of the agricultural base, it was in the interest of the raiders to thin out the population in the vicinity of Paris in order to minimize competition for the available foodstuffs. Aside from choice prizes taken for slavery in one form or another, the local peasantry could be dispersed or slaughtered. A lack of concern for the long-term consequences is evident here. When the Norse leadership mapped out their campaign, they probably assumed Paris would not retard their progress for the duration of the winter, let alone into the planting season of the following year. Where the provisions necessary to maintain a protracted siege could be sourced from in that eventuality did not enter the equation.

The conflict implicit in this illustration of Psalm 44, from the 9th-century *Utrecht Psalter*, speaks to the violence of the age and the confusion of the faithful when the tide of war turned ever more inexorably against them: 'Thou art my King, O God: command deliverances for Jacob. Through thee will we push down our enemies: through thy name will we tread them under that rise up against us… But thou hast cast off, and put us to shame; and goest not forth with our armies … and hast scattered us among the heathen… Thou makest us a reproach to our neighbours, a scorn and a derision to them that are round about us… Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and forgettest our affliction and our oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust: our belly cleaveth unto the earth. Arise for our help, and redeem us for thy mercies' sake.' (Getty)

Accordingly, throughout the demesne of Paris, the Vikings ‘ransacked and despoiled, massacred, and burned and ravaged’ unhindered. In the absence of the royal army, no local forces dared meet the interlopers on open ground: ‘The men in arms, in their keenness to flee, sought out the woods. No one stayed to be found; everyone fled. Alas! None fought back.’ One of the few to stand his ground was the famed Robert the Quiver, the Count of Troyes. Alone aside from a single faithful retainer when the Northmen arrived, and without his shield because one of his own men had taken it when he ordered them to go and keep watch on the movements of the enemy, he went down fighting, slaying two of his assailants. His death was avenged by his nephew Adalhelm, who rallied the domestic militia and caught the Vikings off-guard whilst they were focused on the serious business of looting his uncle’s estate.

## The siege

Even while their foraging parties ranged at will, the Vikings remained stymied in their attempts to storm their enemy’s defences. Now appreciating they could only achieve their objective systematically, throughout December and into January the Vikings set about constructing three wheeled battering rams, complete with roofs fashioned from leather hides, each crewed by 60 men. At the end of the month, these engines of war were unleashed against the Grand Châtelet, supported by artillery fire and grenades, which swept the battlements of the tower and spread fire – and with it panic – among the defenders: ‘Into the city they hurled a thousand pots of molten lead, and the turrets on the bridges were knocked down by catapults.’

The Norse force now split into three detachments; while one supported the assault of the battering rams against the tower, the other two took to the water and drove their longships against the Grand Pont. This pincer movement only needed to succeed in one of its objectives. If the tower fell to the battering rams, the Vikings could roll the Franks back along the length of the bridge and up to the gates of the Île de la Cité. If the bridge was taken by the amphibious assault, the tower would be cut off and its garrison forced to surrender. Aware of the strategic realities facing them, the Franks fought desperately in both sectors. ‘The bridge wept over the warriors that were swept away and died,’ Abbo recorded. ‘No path to the city was left unstained by the blood of men.’ As their comrades on the

Grand Pont struggled to repulse those Viking warriors clambering from the longships onto the crenellations lining the bridge, the defenders of the Grand Châtelet battled with equal fervour to keep the battering rams from approaching their walls. The Norse onslaught was relentless. From the perspective of the battlements, 'nothing could be seen but painted shields; so many that the ground was completely hidden'. Exploiting their numerical advantage, the Vikings fought in shifts, the outnumbered and exhausted Franks receiving little respite after dusk. The garrison was forced to keep torches burning to prevent the enemy from approaching the walls under the cover of night. This left their sentries silhouetted against the light, becoming targets of opportunity for Viking archers sniping from beneath the cloak of darkness.

The following morning, the assault was renewed. Under cover of their shields, the Vikings now focused on filling in the ditches that encircled the tower. To accomplish this task, they employed anything that came to hand – baskets of earth, foliage torn from the surrounding woodland, bales of hay, butchered farm animals and finally, as Abbo relates, 'alas, they slaughtered the luckless captives they held' and cast them into the accumulating debris. Witnessing this, Bishop Gauzlin mouthed a tearful entreaty to the Virgin Mary, imploring her to 'Grant that this foe – impious, fierce, cruel and most wicked, that has slain the captives – be led, I pray, into death's grim noose.' Drawing his bow, he then shot down a Viking warrior, who 'breathed out his soul, born of evil, and stretched out on the earth, filling the ditch just like the very victims of his cruel sword'.

Ironically, this highly stylized representation of the siege of Paris focuses on the one thing the Vikings were not capable of doing – launching an assault on the walls of the Île de la Cité itself. The bridges – closer to the water and spanning the fast-flowing current, rather than parallel to it – were easier targets, and only desperate resistance by the garrison prevented the Vikings from claiming control of them. (Getty)

As dawn broke on 1 February 886, the Vikings returned to the assault. With the ditches neutralized as an obstacle, the battering rams could be wheeled right up to the tower. These approached on all three sides; one against the eastern wall, one against the western and one against the gate on the north face. ‘Death-dealing arrows struck the Danes grimly,’ Abbo wrote, but ‘still they pushed forward’. However, the garrison had been hard at work developing its own weapons of mass destruction. Hastily constructed stone-throwing mangonels were now deployed, unleashing a barrage of heavy missiles against the crews of the battering rams. ‘The brains of those wretches were battered out of their skulls,’ Abbo gleefully recorded, for their hide screens were proof against arrows but not against torsion-propelled artillery rounds.

The price of failure, from the *Liber I Machabaeorum*. The fate of an urban population that could not withstand assault was typically grim, as emphasized in the account of the *Chronicle of Nantes* relating the sack of that city by Norse raiders on 24 June 843: 'What anguish! Who can explain the pain of that day? Who can hold back tears, when children clinging to their dead mothers' breasts received blood instead of milk, when the blood of saintly men, shed by hostile swords, drenched the floor of the cathedral, when sacred altars were covered in the blood of the innocent?' Paris would have been subjected to the same fate in 885 had its resistance faltered. (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

The Vikings now resorted to another stratagem. Having ported three longships overland across the face of the Grand Châtelet, they launched

these in the Seine upstream of the Île de la Cité. Having filled these vessels with flammable material and doused this with pitch, they then ignited all three and, guiding them with ropes from the shore, let them drift with the current downstream towards the Grand Pont. At this spectacle, the denizens of Paris – both garrison and civilians – lost heart, and could do little more than raise their voices in lamentation or prayer. The Norsemen, by contrast, gleefully shouted in anticipated triumph, clashing their shields in their enthusiasm. With the bridge in flames, the tower would be cut off from reinforcement or relief; its fall was inevitable.

**Fireships on the Seine**

Throughout December 885 and into January of the following year the Vikings maintained intense pressure on the Grand Châtelet. In the lulls between assaults, the defenders dug ditches around the tower, hampering the approach of the enemy's siege rams. To ease the approach, the Vikings would attack in separate detachments, one keeping the tower busy with missiles while others would attempt to fill in the ditches with debris, animal carcasses and the corpses of captured Franks. Frustrated in their attempts to take the Grand Châtelet, the Vikings resorted to a new tactic against the Grand Pont; they portaged three ships a short distance around the city and, on the morning of 2 February, launched them in the river upstream, having loaded them with firewood and set them ablaze. Watching from the walls of Paris, the guard can only observe in horror as the Vikings, marching along the Right Bank of the Seine, use guide ropes strung from ship to shore to pilot the vessels towards their target. The intent was to open the river and allow passage upstream by bringing down the bridge and cutting off the Grand Châtelet, thereby leaving it exposed to capture. In the event, this gambit failed too; the ships drifted, as intended, with the current into the bridge, only to ground against the underlying rubble at its base. The defenders were able to extinguish the flames before they spread to the bridge, and even saved the ships. In addition, so many Vikings had been required to serve on the crews maintaining control of the ships from the shore that the rams had been left virtually undefended; the Franks sallied from the Grand Châtelet tower and destroyed two of them.

But the denouement of this episode proved entirely anticlimactic, the fireships grounding against the supporting piles of stones that surrounded the base of its arches before they could reach the bridge itself. Recovering quickly, the Franks raced to extinguish the flames with river water, moving so fast they were able to save the longships, which they claimed as prizes.

Either discouraged or overconfident, the Vikings neglected to post sufficient guard over their battering rams that night. Just before dawn, the garrison of the Grand Châtelet was able to sally out and destroy two of them. Baffled and out of alternatives, Sigfrid ordered his men to break off the siege. Thus it was, Abbo exulted, that on 2 February 886, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Mother of Christ, ‘she allowed our people to rejoice in triumph’.

Spears had a privileged place in Norse culture: in battle, the all-father Odin wielded his spear, *Gungnir*. Ash wood was so commonly used for spear shafts that the term *askr* (‘ash’) was a synonym for the weapon. The Norsemen employed both thrusting and throwing spears. The latter were heavier and had a shorter range than arrows, but more penetrating power. Greater distance could be achieved by using a throwing line, which had a similar effect to a sling. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

If so, the Virgin Mary did not grace the Franks with a protracted space in which to indulge their victory. Just four days later, on the night of 6 February, the rain-swollen Seine overflowed its banks. The bridge supports of the wooden Petit Pont failed and it collapsed into the river, being ‘pulled apart by the raging frenzy of the current’, leaving the wooden Petit Châtelet tower isolated on the Left Bank. The following morning, the Vikings immediately launched an attack: ‘Taking their ships, they loaded them with weapons and shields and crossed the Seine, and then surrounded the pitiful

tower.' By pushing a wagon loaded with hay against the tower and setting it ablaze, the Norsemen succeeded in smoking out the garrison of the Petit Châtelet. At least one Frankish warrior elected to plunge into the now-treacherous Seine and succeeded in swimming his way back to safety on the Île de la Cité. It is likely more tried but failed, drowning in the attempt. Ultimately, there were just 12 men left – Hermanfried, Herland, Odoacer, Herric, Arnold, Soli, Gosbert, Uvido, Hardrad, Einhard, Gozwin and Eriveus – unable or unwilling to risk the turbulent and frigid aquatic alternative that was now the sole remaining route of escape. With no other option, they were forced to abandon the blazing tower and fall back along those remnants of the collapsed bridge that still projected into the river. With fire before them and water behind, the Franks continued to hold their precarious ground until dusk, but finally had no option other than to accept the Viking offer of surrender. One of the dozen, Eriveus, apparently a personage of some distinction, was held for ransom; the others were immediately slain. Eriveus demanded to share the fate of his erstwhile comrades; the Vikings obliged him the following day. They then tore down the ruins of the burned tower and flung the bodies of its slaughtered defenders into the Seine. To this day, a plaque of marble can still be seen near the entrance to the Petit Pont, on which are inscribed the names of these 12 brave Frankish warriors. For the mournful Parisians, it was the darkest hour of the siege.

## Beyond the bridges

With the passage into the heartlands of France now open, Sigfrid portaged his ships overland, again floating the vessels just past the Île de Saint Louis, from where they made their way upriver into the Loire Valley, raiding from Troyes to Le Mans.

Watching the Viking ships receding into the distance, Abbot Ebolus of St Denis convinced himself the entire raiding party had struck out for greener pastures, leaving their camp on the Right Bank at the abbey of St Germain L'Auxerrois abandoned. Apparently meeting with some scepticism, he ventured out, alone and on foot, across the Grand Pont, approached the camp close enough to hurl a spear over its wooden palisade and then returned unmolested. With this display having won over at least some of the garrison, he then sortied out again, this time at the head of a detachment of men, intending to put the entire nest of Norse pirates to the torch.

It is an open question whether those Vikings who had in fact remained at St Germain L'Auxerrois had failed to notice Ebolus when he made his lone approach to their walls, registered his presence but were too baffled or indifferent to respond, or had used him to set a trap by deliberately creating the impression there was no one in residence, hoping the Franks would do exactly what they did: set out from their island sanctuary of Paris to take advantage of the supposed absence of their foe. In any event, the Frankish sortie was repulsed and its participants swiftly put to flight, for men who have grown accustomed to the rhythms of siege warfare and the security of fighting from behind stone ramparts will easily panic when caught on the open ground in sight of their walls. The sources hint that while not every Viking had departed with Sigfrid, the number remaining was in fact not great, and it is quite possible that those left behind had elected to do so, or been told to do so, because they were carrying wounds incurred over the course of the siege to date. Abbo is convinced that had Ebolus been able to bring a greater portion of the garrison with him on this occasion, the sortie would have been successful: 'Had he but five hundred men with him, who were as brave as he, then, easily could he have overrun their encampment.' But it was not to be. At least the Franks made it back to Paris without loss.

Sigfrid, meanwhile, was not finding the easy pickings he had expected beyond Paris. At Chartres, the Vikings were repulsed by a force at whose head were Godfried, the Count of Maine, and Oddo, the Lord of Dunois and Chartrain (and perhaps the brother of Robert the Quiver). The latter, having lost his right hand in a previous conflict, had replaced it with an iron prosthetic. According to Abbo, the Northmen left 1,500 dead behind them when they moved on to Le Mans and Évreux, 'for not one city yielded to them without difficulty'.

The figures in this scene from the *Liber I Machabaeorum* are unarmoured and may represent local levies of infantry. The efficacy of such units varied widely by location. Defensive military strategy in East Francia relied heavily on local levies raised in those portions of the kingdom most vulnerable to attack: Saxony and Frisia. In these regions, this policy proved viable. In 845, the Saxons rallied a force to oppose an incursion up the River Elbe by the Danes, successfully defeating them in battle and driving them out, though the Vikings plundered and burned Hamburg on their return route. The Frisians won two impressive victories over the Norsemen in 873 and 876. (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

With so many of the Vikings absent pillaging elsewhere, their siege lines had thinned to the point where Odo could plausibly dispatch messengers pleading for help to the Frankish nobility as yet uncommitted to the defence

of Paris. One such missive got through to Herkenger, Count of Melun, just south-east of Paris, and from him to Count Heinrich of Fulda, the Margrave of Saxony, who had vital experience in confronting Norse raiders. In 882, with Liutbert, the Archbishop of Mainz, at his side, he had repulsed a Viking attempt to storm that city. In 884, this time accompanied by Arn, the Bishop of Würzburg, Heinrich had defended Saxony against an incursion by the Vikings, pushing them out of their camp at Duisburg and clearing the lower Rhine of their longships.

Cavalry in action, from the *Liber I Machabaeorum*. The instructions of King Henry I to his cavalry prior to the Battle of Riade against the Magyars in 933 offer a salutary lesson in the extent to which warfare – and during the era in question, mounted warfare more than any other – was a collective effort, not a forum for showing off individual prowess: 'As you prepare to advance into battle, no-one should be tempted to ride faster than his comrade, even if he can. Indeed, cover yourselves with your shields and let the first flight of arrows hit the shields; then surge forward and break into them powerfully, so that they may feel themselves wounded before they can launch their arrows again.' (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

Responding to Odo's appeal, Heinrich arrived at Paris in March 886. Abbo describes him as 'fearless and valiant', but he and his men were exhausted at the end of a forced march through inclement winter weather – the *Annals of Fulda* reference how 'they suffered not inconsiderable losses to their horses through floods and sudden cold'. Although upon his arrival 'to the blood-smeared cruel foe he brought death', according to Abbo, this

fate was visited upon ‘far too few’. Heinrich did succeed in penetrating the Viking camp at St Germain L’Auxerrois during a surprise night assault and seized many horses, but the Norsemen rallied, drove him out and then, enraged, vented their fury in another attempt to storm the Grand Châtelet. This failed, but Heinrich subsequently backed off and then about-faced and marched east for home. He may have received word that his own fiefdoms were under threat, and it is possible the Norse depradations of the countryside surrounding Paris had left it too bare for his force to live off the land, but it is most likely that he was aware Sigfrid was returning from his extended foray and did not want to risk being caught between that host of Vikings and those still encamped about the city.

By now it was late March and Paris had been under siege for four months. Conditions within the city had deteriorated to the point where Odo and Gauzlin were compelled to open peace talks with the invaders. The Vikings did not enter into these negotiations in good faith. During one such parley, while Sigfrid and Odo were speaking to each other some distance from the Grand Châtelet, a swarm of Norsemen seized this opportunity to capture or kill the count. He succeeded in fighting them off, having to leap over the ditch below the north tower, shield and spear in hand, to make good his escape.

Understandably, Odo abruptly broke off the talks, but Gauzlin succeeded in reaching a separate agreement with Sigfrid. The terms stipulated the Church would pay him personally 60lb of silver to vacate the abbey of St Germain-des-Prés and quit the siege of Paris. This is a considerably smaller sum than the *danegeld* required to buy off Norse depredations in the past; less than one-hundredth of the 7,000lb in gold and silver Charles the Bald had surrendered to Reginherus in order to induce his withdrawal from Paris in 845, and that was after the Vikings had already sacked the city. For Sigfrid to accept such a paltry sum suggests either that his campaigns elsewhere had netted him so much plunder his greed was already satiated, or that the stout defence of the Île de la Cité to date had raised doubts in his mind that the siege could ever be brought to a satisfactory conclusion.

Whichever was the case, those Northmen who had maintained the siege in his absence were outraged and felt in no way bound by his decision to strike camp and depart. Sigfrid merely stood by and watched as they launched yet another fruitless assault on the Grand Châtelet. Their wounded and the bodies of the slain tumbled into the fast-flowing river, whereupon,

in the poetic depiction of Abbo, ‘the deep, swift current of the Seine became our ally, for it swept away and swallowed Danes; dragged them down to Hell’. Sigfrid laughed at the failure of his erstwhile comrades-in-arms, mockingly exhorting them, ‘Come, brave warriors, charge the ramparts, overrun the city; take measure of the houses you wish to live in afterwards.’ This is an interesting choice of language, for it implies the Vikings were not interested in merely plundering Paris but in occupying and colonizing the city after subduing it. This would explain the unusual stubbornness of the besiegers, for the Vikings were not renowned for protracted campaigns against one objective, preferring instead to utilize the hit-and-run tactics at which they were past masters. Yet they had doggedly remained under the walls of Paris over the winter and remained dug in for the duration. Having foresworn such lofty intentions, the self-satisfied Sigfrid moved on to Friesland, where he was later killed in battle.

Looking every inch the warrior king he would become, Count Odo fights his way out of – or back into – Paris in this image of the desperate sortie he made to raise a relief force during summer 886. The Vikings assailing him are appropriately aggressive, a quality prized in Norse culture, where the pejorative term *skjoldunger* ('shield babies') was applied to warriors who took shelter behind their shields. (iStock)

While the stout defence of Paris had succeeded in keeping the Norse raiders at bay, plague was now raging inside the overcrowded city, and on 16 April, Bishop Gauzlin succumbed to disease. The Franks mourned his loss grievously. 'He was our firm bulwark, our shield, our two-edged sword', Abbo lamented. 'And he was our strongest bow and our keenest

arrow.' Odo rallied the defence, but the attacks continued: 'This notwithstanding, day after day, the Norsemen did not cease to storm the city', the *Annals of St Vaast* record. 'Many on both sides were killed, even more were disabled by wounds, and the food supply began to diminish in the city.' By this point, so many of both the garrison and the general population had fallen that the survivors were running out of space to inter the dead. With his people suffering under the twin torments of what Abbo described as 'the sword without, the plague within', in a bid to boost morale Odo sanctioned such drastic measures as disinterring the mortal remains of St Germain, his body 'being carried in solemn procession to the many parts of the city wall by his followers and many of the inhabitants, who loudly besought Almighty God in a chorus of voices'. Divine intervention did not come, but while the defence buckled, it did not break. 'Not a single day went by when there was not stirred up strife between the inhabitants and the grim foe beyond the walls', Abbo wrote. 'Not a single day went by that did not see one of our men, though struck to death, also send a Dane far down to dark Hell.'

Riding on a white charger, Count Odo leads the defence of Paris in this 19th-century painting by Jean-Victor Schnetz. The arms and accoutrements depicted are anachronistic, but the impression of Odo wearing armour a cut above that of the common combatant is probably accurate. Even the best-protected Frankish horseman was still vulnerable to Viking missiles, however. Norse arrows ranged from broad, double-bladed types suitable for

hunting to narrow shaped arrowheads used purely for warfare, known as *broddr* ('spikes'). The Vikings usually used longbows, fashioned from a single piece of wood – either yew (*ýbogi*) or elm (*almbogi*) – roughly the height of a man. (Getty)

The situation had become so dire that in late May, after delegating command of the defence to Abbot Ebolus, Odo himself departed Paris in a desperate bid to raise a relief force in person. He and just six retainers disguised themselves in Norse attire and slipped out of the city at dawn, when many of the Vikings were still sleeping. Riding hard, they slew seven Vikings as they broke out, heading north.

Ebolus maintained a spirited and aggressive defence, not only repelling assaults against the walls but dispatching sorties by day and night to disrupt Norse foraging, plunder the enemy's livestock and cut off isolated raiding parties. Finally, later that summer – probably in late June – anxious watchmen atop the battlements espied Odo returning to the city with reinforcements from the heights of Montmartre. As Odo rode down onto the plain, the Norsemen rushed to intercept him. As Sinric scrambled to cross the Seine from the Left Bank to get to the action, for some reason – perhaps because he thought it was faster, or conversely because he thought it was sturdier and wanted to arrive with as many warriors as possible – he spurned two of the boats that were readied for him and boarded a third instead, along with 50 men. Midstream, the boat keeled over; Sinric and his party, heavily armed and armoured, all sank to the bottom of the river.

Ebolus, meanwhile, opened the gates to the Grand Châtelet and initiated a sortie, while Odo fought his way through to the city. Abbo breathlessly describes how 'Shields were pounded and arrows flew, and the corpses of the Danes littered the fields, struck down by the noble sword of Adalhelm', nephew of Robert the Quiver, who had joined Odo and distinguished himself in this action. Odo was unhorsed, but he and his party made it to the city safely.

While this episode provided a welcome boost to morale, and the additional fighting men were no doubt welcome, in practical terms, little had been achieved. Odo brought no provisions or other supplies with him, and no word on when – or if – a true relief force on a scale sufficient to break the siege might arrive. And still the Norse assaults kept coming. The relics of St Genevieve were paraded along the walls to inspire the fighting men, for 'There was no place in the city free from fierce battle'. Viking missiles 'fell like rain' into Paris, Abbo recorded. 'Such were the constant

rewards that the enemy gave to us.' The garrison gave as good as it got, but there was no doubt now that the resistance was ebbing: 'Hard fought our men, but the enemy proved far stronger. Greatly wearied by battle, the strength of the righteous was sapped.' With the defence weakening, the Vikings at last succeeded in setting the Grand Châtelet ablaze, and this time the guards fled. Only a sudden summer storm saved the tower, and the city.

## Charles the Fat's relief force

By the end of summer, it was clear Paris could not hold out much longer, but it was at this point the long-awaited relief force finally advanced into view. Charles the Fat was at last on the move with the imperial army towards Paris. The emperor can hardly have been unaware of the siege prior to now. From the mustering of the Norse invaders at Rouen more than a year before, he would have been informed of the Vikings' intention and progress, and subjected to repeated appeals for assistance. Nor was he blind to what was at stake. Archbishop Fulk of Rheims had written to him pointing out the strategic significance of Paris and warning him that 'if it was captured, it would be at the cost of the suffering of the whole kingdom'. It is possible Charles had overestimated the capability of the river defences on the Seine to keep the Norsemen at bay, or been surprised by the unusual tenacity of the foe in maintaining the siege into the winter and then far beyond, when by all rights they should have long ago moved on or departed for home. But in any event, the directives of imperial policy always came first. Charles was preoccupied in 885 by a seditious plot between Hugh, Duke of Alsace, and Godfrid, the Viking whom Charles had appointed Duke of Frisia, who had married Hugh's sister, Gisela. This conspiracy was successfully brought to an abrupt end thanks to the machinations of the loyal Count Heinrich, who arranged for the assassination of Godfrid and then had Hugh confined to a monastery after being blinded. Charles then returned to his overriding preoccupation, the perpetuation of his dynasty.

**Count Odo returns to Paris**

In late May 886, Count Odo of Paris slipped out of the city in a bid to seek assistance in breaking the Viking siege. He returned in June with a small body of fresh troops and supplies, coming up from the direction of Montmartre. The Norsemen attempted to block his approach but, aided by a sally from the Grand Châtelet, Odo and his men

were able to fight their way through to Paris. The cavalry was the elite of Carolingian and Ottonian society, and the sole fighting arm where the Franks maintained a decisive edge over the Viking intruders. When the tactical environment permitted it, such cavalry could be decisive in battle, for it was during this era that the stirrup was becoming a mainstream feature of horse dressage in Europe, enabling a rider to maintain greater stability in, and control over his mount from, the saddle. Carolingian cavalry of the period was heavily armed. By order of Charlemagne, each horseman was expected to muster with a bow and several quivers of arrows in addition to his shield, lance and sword. By the late 9th century, this was typically the double-edged longsword (*spatha*). Unless drawn up in a shield wall, Vikings caught on level ground could not withstand a charge by such heavy shock troops. Those individuals caught in the path of Odo's relief force in its desperate sprint to cover the last stretch of ground leading to the city were brushed aside or ridden down.

His marriage having produced no heir, he was determined to secure the succession of his illegitimate son, Bernard. The endorsement of the Church would lend considerable moral authority to this agenda, and Charles had summoned Hadrian III to meet with him at Regensburg to secure a papal blessing. However, the Pope died in September before even crossing the Alps. The clergy and nobility of Rome immediately elected his successor, Stephen V, without direct consultation with the emperor, whose attempt to have the pontiff deposed by force on this technicality failed because the

election had taken place with the cooperation of the imperial legate in Rome. Charles now resolved to pursue the issue of the succession in person. He was no doubt aware of his responsibilities to Paris, but as he assessed it, the relief of the city could be delegated to subordinates – for example, the attempt to break the Viking siege by Count Heinrich, when as Regino of Prüm specifically states, 'In the spring the emperor sent the dux Henry against them with an army' – while he attended to the primary threat to the realm, for he was well aware of the implications of a disputed succession. Having achieved the restoration of the imperial dream, he was fixated on its perpetuation through his line. Accordingly, in the spring of 886, he sojourned to Italy to press the claim for Bernard. After months of negotiations, a deal was struck. In return for the Pope acknowledging Bernard as his heir, Charles would join the coalition Stephen was building with the Byzantine Emperor Leo VI for joint action against the Saracen corsairs then ranging unchecked throughout the Mediterranean.

The first tendrils of the Viking onslaught touched the shores of Carolingian Europe during the reign of Charlemagne himself. Charlemagne's conquest of the Saxons created a border between his empire and the kingdom of the Danes, bringing the Frankish and Scandinavian worlds face to face. The ensuing friction erupted into outright war in 810. Ironically, it was the assassination of the Danish King Godfrid that same year, and the ensuing collapse of centralized state authority in the realm, that unleashed the freelance Viking raiders. (Fitzwilliam Museum/Bridgeman Images)

The agreement reached, Charles was at last free to depart and turn north for Paris. His progress was agonizingly slow, however, and while he was still at Metz an advance party led by Count Heinrich came to grief. On 28

August, the count, riding ahead of his men from the imperial palace at Quierzy on the Oise to scout out the locations and dispositions of the Norse camps, stumbled into one of the disguised pit traps the Vikings had dug around their siege lines (perhaps in response to the mounted charge led by Odo when he returned to the city earlier in the year, or perhaps before that, as the *Annals of St Vaast* imply Odo himself entered the city on foot). The dismounted Heinrich was swarmed by Norsemen and killed. He was buried in the monastery of St Medard in Soissons.

Names given to axes in Norse culture were consistently in the feminine form, referring to wild, primitive, uncultivated nature, destruction, aggression and rage, such as Galdsgýr ('lunatic old hag troll'). Other names are more descriptive: *genja* ('shriek, terrify'), *skràma* ('horrify, terrify'), *Skaðl* ('maim'), *Svartleggja* ('send into darkness'), *hamartröll* ('troll hammer') and *grand hjalms* ('helmet wrecker'). (Getty)

The news of his death was a severe blow to Charles, and the emperor did not arrive at Paris until 24 October. His mere appearance came as a godsend to the beleaguered garrison, who rejoiced at his presence, 'surrounded by arms of all sort', in such numbers, according to Abbo, the sun glittering off their weapons dominated the horizon, 'just as the sky is filled with splendid stars'. The imperial host set up camp at the base of Montmartre and pushed forward a vanguard of 600 men, led by Odo's father-in-law, Count Aledramnus, and his brother, Count Theoderic of Vermandois. The Norse siege lines were broken, some of the routed Danes, ironically, seeking shelter in those churches closest to the walls. Abbo gleefully relates how the Franks pursued them into one of these houses of God and 'left it only when it was stuffed with the dead'. With Aledramnus and Theoderic having

‘linked together the Seine with Montmartre by so many rows’ of slaughtered Vikings, those Norsemen remaining on the north bank abandoned their main camp at St Germain L’Auxerrois and fled to the opposite shore of the Seine, allowing Charles to freely enter the city via the battered Grand Châtelet and Grand Pont.

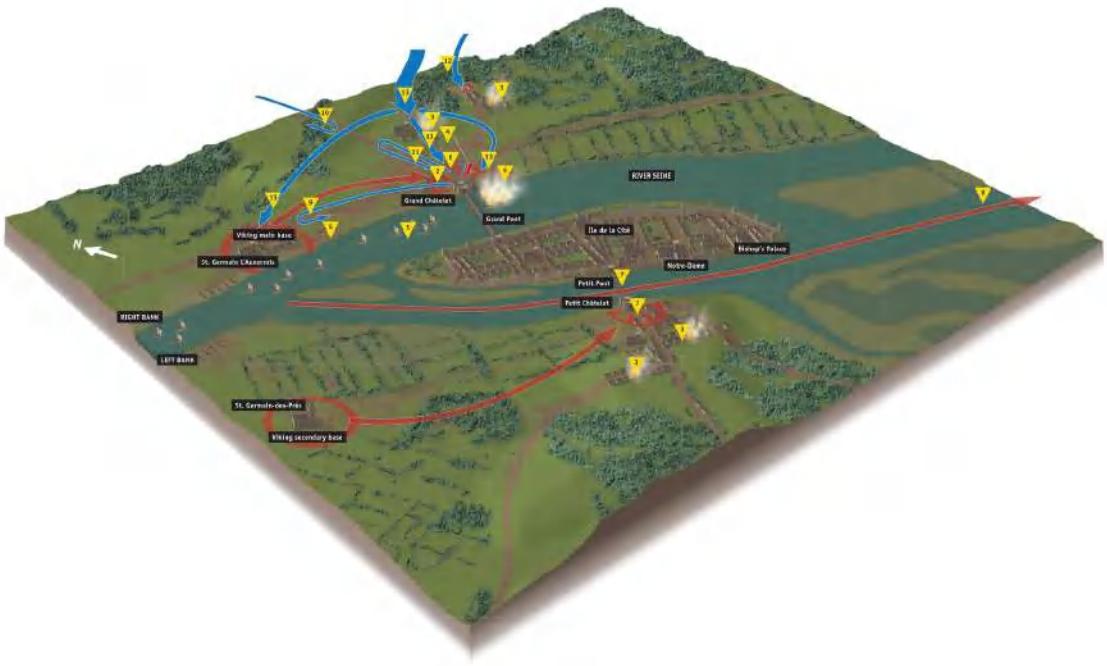
The stage was set for a dramatic and decisive Viking defeat. The city of Paris stood unbroken, straddling the Seine; the Norse, depleted after 11 straight months of fruitless siege warfare, were on the back foot; and the vast host of the imperial army loomed over them, poised to strike the killing blow. But that blow would never fall.

## The Vikings move on

Contemporary accounts are curt, even contemptuous, concerning what happened next. Abbo states simply that ‘the heathens were permitted to make their way to Sens and were given seven hundred silver pounds on the promise that come March, they would all return to their accursed kingdoms’. In fact, Charles did not hand over any sum at that time; he only pledged himself to do so. Nonetheless, the *Annals of St Vaast* condemn the agreement reached as ‘a truly wretched plan. For the Danes were promised both a ransom and unimpeded passage to plunder Burgundy.’

### THE SIEGE OF PARIS

**885-886**




## EVENTS

**1.** The Vikings under Sigfrid and Sinric arrive beneath the walls of Paris at the end of November 885. After their demand for tribute and unimpeded access upriver is rejected by Count Odo and Bishop Gauzlin, the Norse make preparations for a siege. Sigfrid sets up the main Viking camp on the Right Bank of the Seine, based on the church and abbey of St Germain L'Auxerrois. Sinric commands the secondary camp on the Left Bank at the abbey of St Germain-des-Prés.

**2.** Repeated Viking attempts to storm the Grand Châtelet, the fortress guarding the entrance to the Grand Pont, the bridge linking the Île de la Cité to the Right Bank of the Seine, are thrown back by desperate Frankish resistance.

**3.** Viking raiders ransack and plunder the surrounding territories, directing a steady stream of foodstuffs and loot back to their camps.

**4.** In the New Year the Vikings construct three battering rams and launch an intensified assault against the Grand Châtelet, supported by amphibious assaults from their longships against the Grand Pont.

**5.** The Vikings portage three longships around the Grand Châtelet, refloat them in the Seine, set them ablaze and unleash them against the Grand Pont from upstream.

**6.** The Franks launch a nighttime sortie and succeed in destroying two of the Viking battering rams.

**7.** On the night of 6 February 886, the Seine floods and washes away the Petit Pont. Cut off, the garrison of the Petit Châtelet are massacred.

**8.** With the Seine now unobstructed, Sigfrid leads a raiding party upriver, pillaging from Troyes to Le Mans.

**9.** With so many Vikings absent on campaign, Abbot Ebolus of St Denis leads a sortie against the main Viking camp at St Germain L'Auxerrois, but this is repulsed.

**10.** Responding to urgent appeals for aid, Count Heinrich of Fulda arrives with a relief force in March, but he has too few men to break the siege and is forced to withdraw.

**11.** The siege continues into the summer; famine and disease stalk Paris. Sigfrid is bought off but Sinric remains and Gauzlin dies. Odo breaks out in a bid to raise a new relief force; he fights his way back into the city with reinforcements, and Sinric is killed in the struggle, but the siege continues.

**12.** On 28 August, Count Heinrich of Fulda, riding in the vanguard of the imperial army, is trapped by the Vikings and killed.

**13.** On 24 October, Charles the Fat arrives with the main body of the imperial army. The siege of Paris is broken. The Vikings are routed from the Right Bank of the Seine and the emperor enters the city in triumph. However, rather than taking this opportunity to annihilate the raiders, Charles elects instead to bargain with them, paying them off and directing them upriver to chastise his rebellious subjects elsewhere.

Why did Charles enter into this bargain? From a modern perspective, that of the unitary state, where the defence of national sovereignty is the primary obligation of the ruler, the emperor had betrayed a fundamental clause of the social contract with his people. But imperatives were different for the head of state in a patchwork feudal realm like the Carolingian Empire. The *Annales Vedastini* report that negotiations were initiated because winter was approaching. Given the size of the imperial army and the already parlous state of the countryside surrounding Paris, where the planting season would have been hopelessly compromised that year (assuming any crops were sown at all), supply would have become a serious problem during the following months, making it necessary to disband at least some of his forces, if not send the entire army home. In any event, the Norsemen were a lot more useful to Charles alive than dead. As mercenaries, they would serve his interests by raiding upriver and bringing the rebellious Burgundians to heel on his behalf, without him having to risk his own army for the purpose, a role the Vikings were only too happy to play. By unleashing 'these heathens whose swords were to bring you much grief, O Burgundy, little accustomed to war', Charles could broadcast to the rest of his subjects the price of defiance, 'for now you too know who these heathens are', Abbo bitterly concluded. The price negotiated was simply a cost-effective means to an end; the promised 700lb of silver was only one-tenth the ransom of 845. Furthermore, those Vikings who had already departed Paris were still on the loose. Even the hostile *Annals of St Vaast* concede this, stating: 'Sigfrid, with all his men, was advancing up the river Oise, making a march by water and land, laying waste to everything with sword and fire. Because the emperor knew this – for the fire carried a definite message – he rushed to return to his own land.'

Metaphors for swords in skaldic verse include *ormþvari* (‘snake-creature’), *fjörsoðnir* (‘life’s flesh-boiler’), *styrjökull* (‘violence’s icicle’), *mærir dreyra* (‘slender blood-dripper’) and *þorn rógs skjaldar* (‘shield-mocking thorn’). In the epic Norse poem *Njála*, the hero Gunnarr Hámundarson was described as wielding his blade so swiftly that *at þrjú þóttu á lopti at sjá* (‘it appeared that there were three [swords] in the air [at once]’). (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

From an imperial perspective, therefore, the heroic defence of Paris was simply a bargaining chip that enabled Charles to hold a stronger hand in his direction of future policy. The emperor did make sure to recognize and reward his faithful subjects; Charles appointed a new Bishop of Paris – Anscheric, the abbot of St Germain-d’Auxerre – to succeed Gauzlin, and granted Odo secular authority in Paris and the *honores* of his father, Robert the Strong, namely the counties along the Loire together with the abbeys of St Martin and St Aignan. Then he was gone, never to return.

On this somewhat anticlimactic note, the saga of Paris and the Vikings apparently ended. But the outcome of the siege was to have unforeseen consequences for all the major players involved – Charles, Odo and the Norsemen – that would profoundly alter dynastic politics and the very map of Europe for centuries to come.

# AFTERMATH

At the Diet of Tribur on 27 November 887, Charles the Fat was deposed as emperor. He was allowed to retire to Neidingen in Alemannia, where he died on 13 January 888, ostensibly of natural causes, but ‘it is said’, the *Annals of St Vaast* relate, that ‘he was strangled by his men’.

Whatever the vicissitudes of his reign, Charles had been the recognized emperor of the entire Carolingian realm. His death created a power vacuum at the heart of Carolingian politics. As Regino of Prüm noted, as soon as Charles was gone, ‘the kingdoms which had obeyed his authority, just as though a legitimate heir were lacking, dissolved into separate parts and, no longer waiting for a natural lord, each decided to create a king from its own guts’. Over the ensuing period of roughly 20 years from the death of Charles the Bald until the accession of Charles the Simple as sole king of Western Francia, during which five very different rulers quickly succeeded each other, the Carolingian dream of imperial hegemony was finally killed off. The states of France, Germany and Italy definitively emerged as its successors, creating the essential alignment that persists to this day.

This 9th-century depiction of Charles the Bald highlights the majesty of his office, and not his ignoble fate. According to the *Annals of St Bertin*, he died while crossing the Alps, and having asked to be buried at St Denis, his body decomposed en route and was sealed inside a barrel with pitch. 'But even this did nothing to get rid of the smell. Only with difficulty did they manage to reach Nantua, a little monastery in the archdiocese of Lyons, and there they committed the body, with its barrel, to the earth.' (Getty)

In the east, Arnulf of Carinthia, the illegitimate son of Carloman of Bavaria, older brother to Charles the Fat, had led the revolt against his uncle, and was subsequently acclaimed as the King of Germany. To the south, Berengar, son of Eberhard of Friuli, who could claim Carolingian descent through a daughter of Louis the Pious, emerged as King in Italy. In the west, the last legitimate direct heir of Carolingian male descent, Charles the Simple, the eight-year-old son of Louis the Stammerer, was clearly too young to ascend to the throne. Even though he was not a Carolingian by birth, Odo had proven himself a more than capable military leader during the siege of Paris and, due to his family ties and his proximity to Charles the Fat, had acquired the inheritances not only of Gauzlin after his death,

but also that of his half-brother, Hugh, who had died in 886. As such, Odo united military command as Margrave of Neustria and political authority over the counties of Tours, Angers and Blois, as well as the abbeys of Noirmoutier and St Martin of Tours, with the County of Paris and the abbey of St Denis. In his person, therefore, the Western kingdom now had a magnate powerful enough to dominate the nobility and legitimize himself through military victory. Odo was crowned King of France at Compiègne on 29 February 888 by Walter, Archbishop of Sens.

The apotheosis of Odo: his coronation as King of West Francia at Compiègne on 29 February 888 by Walter, Archbishop of Sens, marking the first occasion a non-Carolingian had claimed the throne since the deposition of the last Merovingian king, Childeric III, in 751 at the behest of Pepin the Short. Odo's uncompromising defence of Paris raised hopes he could fulfil the same role for the entire realm. However, although he was victorious over Norse incursions at Montfaucon in 888 and Montpensier in 892, Odo, like his predecessors, ultimately found his reign consumed in rebellion and dynastic infighting that short-circuited his honest attempt to prioritize the Viking threat. (The History Collection/Alamy Stock Photo)

The Norsemen, meanwhile, remained at large within the Carolingian heartland. With the raising of the siege of Paris, the Vikings continued up the Seine, where they besieged Sens on 30 November 886. They wintered at Melun on the upper Seine and returned to Paris at the end of May 887 to collect the ransom they had been promised by Charles the Fat the previous year. Clearly suffering no hindrance from the bridge at Charenton, they wintered on the Marne at Chezy in 887. The following year, the Norsemen again pushed upriver, where they proceeded to ravage all of northern France and a part of Burgundy up to the Meuse.

In a great victory that did much to legitimize his reign, Odo defeated the Vikings in the forest of Montfaucon in the Argonne region on 24 June 888. 'Pagan lives flowed away in currents of blood', read the breathless, highly exaggerated account of Abbo, the king having 'routed ten thousand horsemen of the heathens, and then nine thousand of their foot soldiers'. Leading from the front, Odo narrowly survived an encounter with a Norse warrior, a swing of whose axe lopped off the very tip of the royal helmet. Subsequently, he was recognized as king by Arnulf, who sent royal insignia for a second consecration at Rheims on 13 November. The Vikings, meanwhile, had pulled back to the Marne, where they besieged Meaux from June to October of 888. The defence was led by Anscheric's brother, Count Tetbert. 'Forever was he beset by constant grim battles, and ever did he firmly resist and fight back. A great number he slew from among the gathered host of foes,' Abbo recorded. 'The cruel heathens, how many were the souls his arrows wrenched away, cannot be told.' But Tetbert was finally killed, Meaux was sacked and its bishop, Sigemund, taken captive.

Having wintered at Meaux, the Norsemen then rode the current back down the Seine to once more appear under the walls of Paris in 889. Abbo relates how on this occasion it was Anscheric and Ebolus who rallied the resistance: 'They called for arms, for the banks to be secured, the walls shored up.' Apparently, the Petit Pont had been repaired by this time, for the Viking passage downriver was stymied, which could only have happened if both bridges again spanned the river.

> Thereupon, the Norsemen sued for peace; offered hostages, and swore an oath that they would land on no other shore than that of the Seine and would fall back to their prior positions. And as for the region nourished by the Marne, they would leave it in peace, for which they gave us 'full assurance', as it is called.

The agreement reached, relations between the Norsemen and Parisians became remarkably convivial remarkably quickly, at least according to Abbo: 'We both began to share the same house, bread, drink, seat, road, bed.' But this amiable interlude lasted only until the Vikings were allowed to port their longships around the defences of the city. Once free to roam at will on the river, they immediately reverted to their established habits, openly abducting Christians as slaves. 'Dead was the shared peace, gone the accord of the assurance', Abbo recorded. Enraged, the Parisians 'ran throughout the city and the marketplaces, seeking cruel heathens, if they could be found. Happily, they found some fifty, and struck them down and slew them.'

Odo then returned to Paris, having assembled a vast host, 'so great a number that their count was untold'. There was some skirmishing with the invaders, in which Odo's cousin, Ademar, and Sclademar, a retainer of his father, Count Robert the Strong, were prominent, but the lion's share of the credit in the annals of Abbo was reserved for the new Bishop of Paris. In what must have been satisfying revenge for the death of his brother Tetbert – if not exactly a model exhibition of turning the other cheek – 600 'of these faithless heathens were struck down into the dust, in grim and fierce strife, by that most noble pastor Anscheric, who had with him only three hundred foot soldiers, as well as the power of the Virgin'.

However, Odo could not obtain commitments from the various regional contingents nominally under his command to stand and fight for the city. 'This assembly did not endure', Abbo sadly recorded, 'so there was no triumph.' Ironically, Odo found himself in the same position as Charles the Fat, who had led a similarly great army to Paris just three years earlier only to be left with no option but to buy off the Vikings with a ransom. The Norsemen subsequently departed for the Cotentin and then went on to Brittany, where their grand excursion finally petered out in defeat in 891. That same year, another incursion made landfall, killing Archbishop Sunderolt of Mainz before establishing a fortified camp in marshy land on a loop of the River Dyle near Louvain. In September, King Arnulf led an assault against this entrenched threat. When the Germans broke through the defences, many Vikings tried to escape, only to drown in droves. According to the *Annals of Fulda*, so many of their corpses piled up in the Dyle that they impeded the flow of the river. The Norsemen lost both leaders of the expedition and 16 standards. However, while the *Annals of St Vaast* record

that Arnulf had succeeded in killing ‘no modest multitude of Danes’, after he withdrew the surviving Norsemen regrouped and refortified their encampment, fully committed to overwintering on the Continent and continuing their campaign in the New Year. In 892, Odo mobilized an army and marched to Amiens to dislodge them, but, according to the *Annals of St Vaast*, met with no success. In fact, in the Vermandois region, the Vikings overran Odo ‘and forced him to flee, because the watch had been neglected’. The Norsemen only departed, via Boulogne for England, because famine was stalking the Continent and the communities they preyed upon were too straitened to support predation.

Tightly packed ranks of cavalry in battle, from the *Liber I Machabaeorum*. The wild, inchoate representations in popular culture of Dark Ages warfare do not do justice to the military professionalism of the period. A case in point is the victory of King Odo against the Vikings laying siege to Montpensier in 892, as described by Richer of St Rémi. Confronted by a Norse shield-wall, Odo arranged his 6,000 footmen in advance of his 10,000 cavalry. The infantry advanced and first fired arrows into the Norse ranks, then closed with spears. Once the enemy’s shield-wall had been broken open, Odo’s cavalry charged and routed the disorganized Vikings. But another contingent of 4,000 Norsemen, either placed in reserve or, more likely, returning late from a raid, advanced against the celebrating Franks, hoping to catch them off guard. However, Odo had stationed pickets, which raised the alarm; upon their king’s signal, the Frankish army re-formed and successfully drove them off. (Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections/**CC-BY-4.0**)

While unwelcome, the Viking incursions represented only a minor threat to Odo’s authority compared to his domestic dynastic political concerns.

From its inception, his reign was troubled, defined by an inevitable tension with the maturing Charles the Simple and endemic separatism in the provinces, from Flanders to Burgundy. The burden of office bore heavily as court intrigue and the temptations of power induced men who had fought side-by-side against the Viking menace to now turn on each other. Odo's archchancellor, Ebolus, had a nephew, Ebalus Manzer, the illegitimate son of Ranulf, Duke of Aquitaine, who had a claim to succeed as Count of Poitiers. In early 892, however, Odo decided to grant Poitiers to Count Altmar, thus provoking Ebolus and his brother Gauzbert to take up arms in their nephew's cause. When Odo marched on Aquitaine, Ebolus 'turned in flight and was killed near a certain *castellum* by a stone', the *Annals of St Vaast* record. His brother was subsequently run to ground, besieged, 'and in a short time, met death'.

This portrait of a 9th-century Carolingian magnate, from a fresco in the San Benedetto (St Benedict) church in Trentino, Italy, nicely illustrates the dimensions and trappings of a *spatha*-style cavalry sword from the era. (Getty)

The Norse shadow continued to loom over the squabbling potentates of Western Europe. ‘I groan to tell once more of the coming of the godless Heathens,’ Abbo lamented when the Vikings returned in the summer of 896 under a leader called Hundeus. ‘They devastated the land and slaughtered the people.’ It is a measure of how integral the role of defender of the realm against this threat had become for the people of France that Abbo turned on Odo, a man he had so admired, for his failure to respond effectively to this crisis:

Worst of all, King Odo heard of this, but he cared not – he said as much. O, what a base, shameful response! Surely, this could not have come from your mouth. Certainly, it was the Devil that spoke through you; how could your spirit neglect the sheep Christ put in your care?' The Vikings 'rejoiced and exulted and let their ships wander through all the rivers that water Gaul, and held sway on land and sea. And he, who was our protector, allowed this to happen.

The main threat to the reign of Odo as King of France was political, not military. His authority rested on the fragile basis of reputation, a weak hand to play in an age of deference to rank. To many, the rival claim of Charles the Simple, who was of Carolingian descent, was more legitimate, and Odo spent the last five years of his reign fighting an endemic low-intensity civil war in defence of his crown. The legacy of Charlemagne remained too vivid for the magnates and people of France to move past his heirs. It would take another century before a new dynasty could settle into power. (Noble Numismatics, **www.noble.com.au**)

The *Annales Vedastini*, too, refers to Odo prioritizing the defence of his crown against the claim of Charles the Simple over defending the realm from this external threat: 'And because the king busied himself with other affairs, he increased the great evil coming on him and the realm.' The intervention of the Norsemen disrupted factional alliances within France. One of Odo's most implacable enemies was Fulk, Archbishop of Rheims, who had attempted to instal his kinsman Guy III, Duke of Spoleto, as King of France when Charles the Fat was deposed, crowning him at Langres in 888. When this coup de théâtre failed, Fulk first invited Arnulf to take the throne and then, in January 893, crowned Charles the Simple king in defiance of Odo. But when, three years later, he discovered that Charles was

building bridges with the Norsemen – even going so far as to preside over the baptism of Hundeus during Easter – he bluntly warned Charles that should he proceed with this budding alliance, the archbishop would not only rescind his support but would also encourage others to do so; furthermore, he would excommunicate his erstwhile protégé.

Odo died on New Year's Day 898. Charles the Simple succeeded him as King Charles III of France, but the destinies of their rival families remained intertwined. In an assembly at Soissons on 29 June 922, rebellious nobles declared Charles III deposed and acclaimed Odo's younger brother as King Robert I; Archbishop Walter of Sens crowned him the next day in Rheims. The two sides clashed a year later, on 23 June 923, at Soissons. Robert was killed, but his army was victorious, and it was his son-in-law, Rudolph, the Duke of Burgundy and Count of Troyes, who was crowned King of France on 13 July. Charles III was incarcerated and died still a prisoner in 929. While his son would eventually come to power as Louis IV, succeeding Rudolph in 936 and reigning until 954, the future belonged to the descendants of Robert, whose grandson, Hugh Capet, took the throne in 987 to become the progenitor of the Capetian line, which would rule France until 1328. Throughout their reigns, however, the Capetian kings would have to share the territory of France with a rival dynasty, one that traced its lineage back to a final association with the siege of Paris in 885–86.

In 911, a warband of Vikings led by Rollo, a veteran of campaigns in the British Isles, crossed over to the Continent and entered the Seine Valley. According to legend, Rollo (the Latin version of the Norse Hrolf) was of such enormous stature that he was dubbed Rollo the Walker (*Hrolf Granger*), since because horses could not support his weight, he had to go everywhere on foot. Repulsed from Paris, Rollo laid siege to Chartres. While Bishop Gantelme rallied the garrison of the city, a relief force led by Odo's brother, Robert, then Count of Poitiers, Count of Paris and Margrave of Neustria, and Richard, Duke of Burgundy, mustered south of the city. They offered battle on 20 July. Rollo had his army drawn up in a concave pattern which pressed hard against the Burgundians in the centre of the relief army. Duke Richard, under great pressure, began to slowly give ground, which threatened to collapse the allied force. At this moment, Gantelme, bearing sacred relics associated with the Virgin Mary, led the garrison in a sortie from Chartres that broke the Norse line.

Rollo fell back to his camp on a hill north of the city. Trapped and surrounded by superior numbers, including those of the late-arriving Duke Ebalus of Aquitaine, he dispatched handpicked warriors that evening to infiltrate the enemy lines and, under cover of darkness, sound their war horns. The allies were consequently thrown into confusion, enabling Rollo to slip away.

Odo, represented here on the obverse of this silver *denier* issued by the royal mint in Carcassonne, served as King of France between 888 and 898. In an uncertain age, his undisputed martial credentials were his trump card in staking his claim to the throne. (Noble Numismatics, **www.noble.com.au**)

The allies regrouped and in the morning set out in pursuit. The Norsemen, driven back to their longships, could not board them for the enemy was hard on their heels. In a desperate bid to buy time, Rollo and his men constructed a makeshift defensive perimeter by slaughtering their horses and livestock and piling the bodies into a wall.

Charles III could have consummated this campaign with a decisive victory. Instead, he decided to negotiate. In return for his fealty and conversion to Christianity, Rollo was granted the land between the River Epte and the English Channel in order to hold the mouth of the Seine against any attempted Viking incursions in future. This was the origins of the *Terra Normanorum*, which would evolve into the Duchy of Normandy.

Rollo accepted baptism at the hands of the Archbishop of Rouen. As was the custom, he took the baptismal name Robert, after the man sponsoring his conversion, his godfather Robert, Margrave of Neustria. Apparently, this

conversion was less than wholehearted. According to one version of the *Lament for William Longsword*, Rollo appears to have reverted to paganism before his death, and Ademar of Chabannes later recorded the tradition that just before he died, he ordered the sacrifice of 100 Christian captives to propitiate the Viking gods he had betrayed.

These anecdotes illustrate the point that, in a tradition worthy of the sagas, the character and deeds of Rollo span the divide between history and myth. One aspect of this ambiguity is the convention that he participated in the 885–86 siege of Paris. Although the Carolingian chronicles do not mention his name, it is assumed that was owing to his youth and relative obscurity when the siege commenced. According to this narrative, by his deeds he grew in stature as the siege progressed, perhaps to the point where he took command after the death of Sinric and negotiated the settlement with Charles the Fat.

Charles the Fat negotiates an end to the siege of Paris. Charles reached a deal by which he essentially contracted the Vikings to serve as mercenaries to bring his rebellious subjects in Burgundy to heel. Though the *Annals of St Vaast* condemned the agreement reached as 'a truly wretched plan', there is no evidence a popular backlash played any part in his subsequent deposition as emperor. However, Odo's heroic role in the defence of Paris did allow him to emerge as an alternative in West Francia. (Photo Josse/Bridgeman Images)

However, this perspective is based entirely on taking at face value the *Historia Normannorum* written by Dudo of Saint-Quentin, perhaps the most fantastic mishmash of fact and utter fantasy to emerge from a medieval era

not noted for fidelity to historical accuracy. According to Dudo, who already credits Rollo with taking Rouen as early as 876, under the walls of Paris in 885, he:

> sent to the princes of the city either to surrender it to him or to give him hostages or to prepare themselves for a diligent defence. However the citizens have not been willing to surrender the town to him or to give him hostages, but they are hastening to prepare themselves for the battles of the coming day. Truly, rising at dawn at the time of the continuous conflict, Rollo has begun the day's combat and, for an entire day, has cast down citizens in battle. Seeing, however, that he has not captured the town through battle, at nightfall he has equipped his ships with sails and has left Paris behind.

Not only is this wildly implausible, but Dudo contradicts his own narrative when he asserts that, far from abandoning the siege after a single day, 'once Rollo has passed a year besetting Paris in the siege, he makes for Bayeux, and he has taken possession of it by force and has utterly destroyed the entire city and has claimed for himself captives and spoils from the whole region'. Amongst his prizes was Popa, who would become the mother of his son and heir, William Longsword.

Unfortunately, this makes much of Dudo's account of the presumptive Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte in 911 between Rollo and Charles III suspect, including the clause that Rollo took Charles's daughter Gisela as his bride, and the anecdote that when Rollo was urged to kiss the king's foot to demonstrate his allegiance the Norseman refused, ordering one of his warriors to perform this distasteful obligation on his behalf. Instead of dropping to his knees, the warrior complied by wrenching the king's foot up to his mouth, which 'caused the king to topple backwards', much to the amusement of Rollo's entourage.

# CONCLUSION

Even if Rollo played no part in the epic Norse siege of Paris, it suited his descendants to propagate the myth that he did so. Rollo's heirs not only expanded the size of the Norse enclave in France, but the martial culture that emerged – a potent hybrid of Viking and Carolingian bloodlines – carved out an empire in southern Italy, constituted the backbone of the First Crusade and, in its most significant contribution to history, conquered England in 1066. The dynasties founded by Rollo on the one hand and his godfather Robert on the other would be entangled in a bloody succession of wars spanning the next several centuries. When Philip IV, the Capetian King of France, and Edward I, the Plantagenet King of England, ratified peace between them at the Treaty of Montreuil-sur-Mer on 19 June 1299, they would have understood that the rivalry between their two families transcended national identity and the affairs of state. So far as they were concerned, their confrontation began on that autumn day in 885 when the watchers on the walls of Paris witnessed Norse longships marshalling beneath them on the cold waters of the River Seine.

When his sons fell out with each other, Louis the Pious reclaimed the throne and reunited the realm in 834. Nevertheless, the seeds of future division had been sown. The Carolingian inheritance suffered from being too large and unwieldy, but ironically also from not continuing the process of expansion of Louis' predecessors Charles Martel, Pepin the Short and Charlemagne. Without new conquests and booty, the magnates became restless and rebellious, turning their military efforts *inward* against imperial authority rather than *outward*.

After Louis died in 840, his sons fought at the bloody battle of Fontenoy; the wary Peace of Verdun in 843 divided the realm between them. (Noble Numismatics, **www.noble.com.au**)

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

London-born Si Sheppard completed his Bachelors and Masters degrees in New Zealand before receiving his doctorate from Johns Hopkins University in the United States. He is currently an associate professor of political science and international relations at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York.

# ILLUSTRATORS

Edouard Groult grew up inspired by watching historical documentaries with his father and developed a fascination for historical and fantasy art. Following art studies in both Paris and Belgium, he worked as a concept artist in the videogame industry and, in recent years, has also undertaken historical commissions for magazines. He lives and works in Oxford.

Bird's-eye-view illustrator Alan Gilliland studied photography, film and architecture, and spent 18 years as the graphics editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. He now writes, illustrates and publishes fiction as well as illustrating for a variety of publishers. He lives in Lincolnshire.

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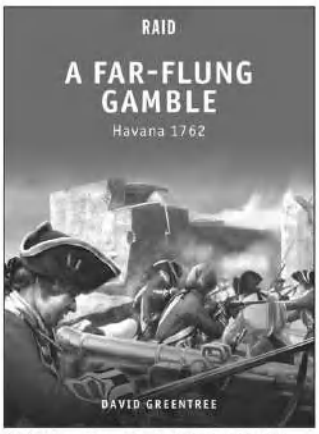


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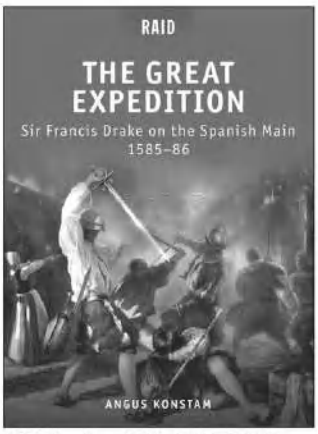


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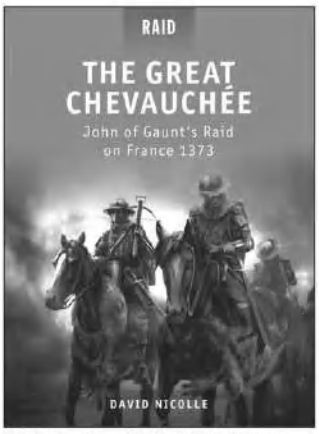


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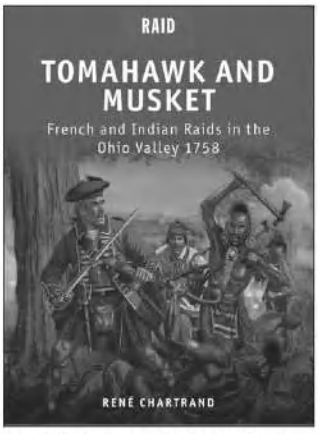


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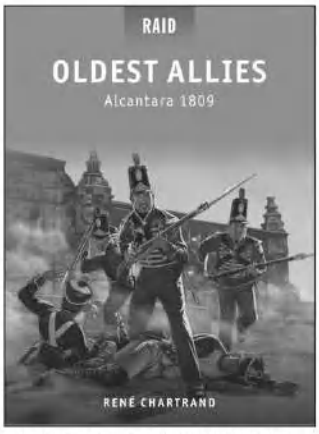


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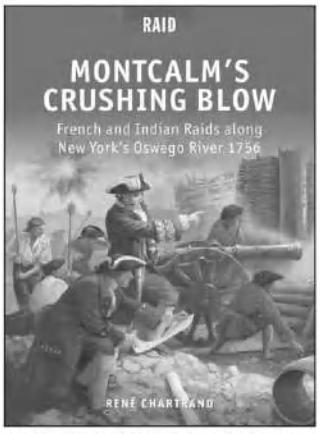


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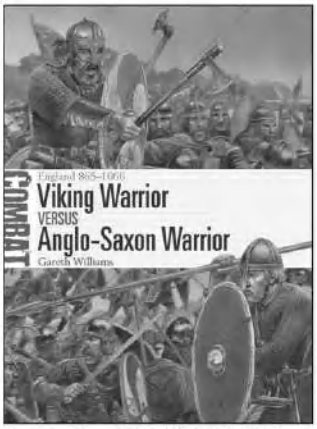


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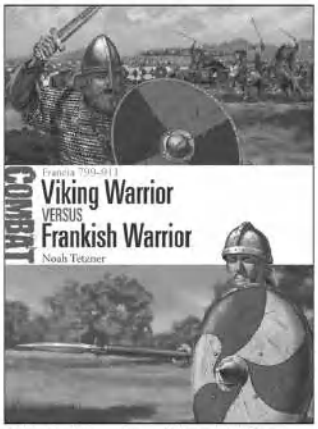


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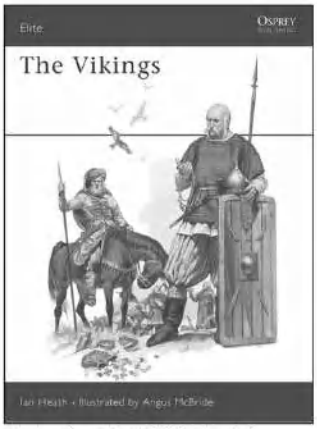


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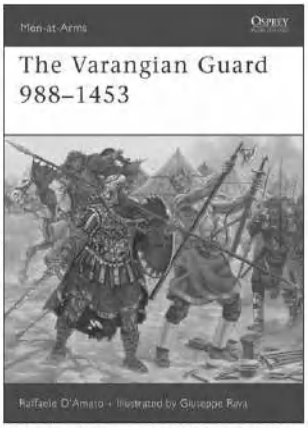


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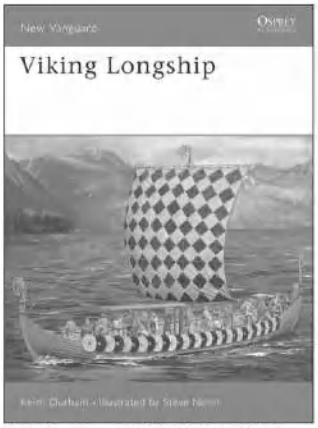


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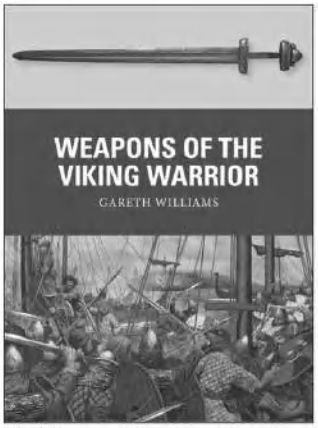


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